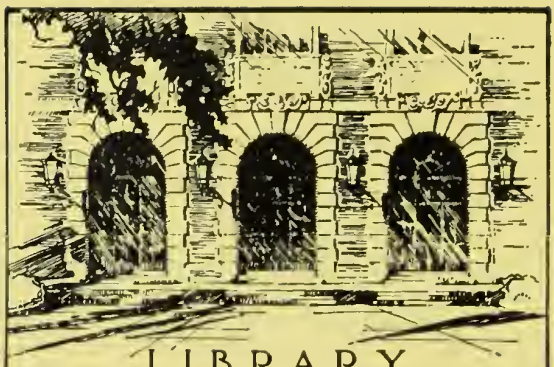
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BY

W. E. NORRIS.

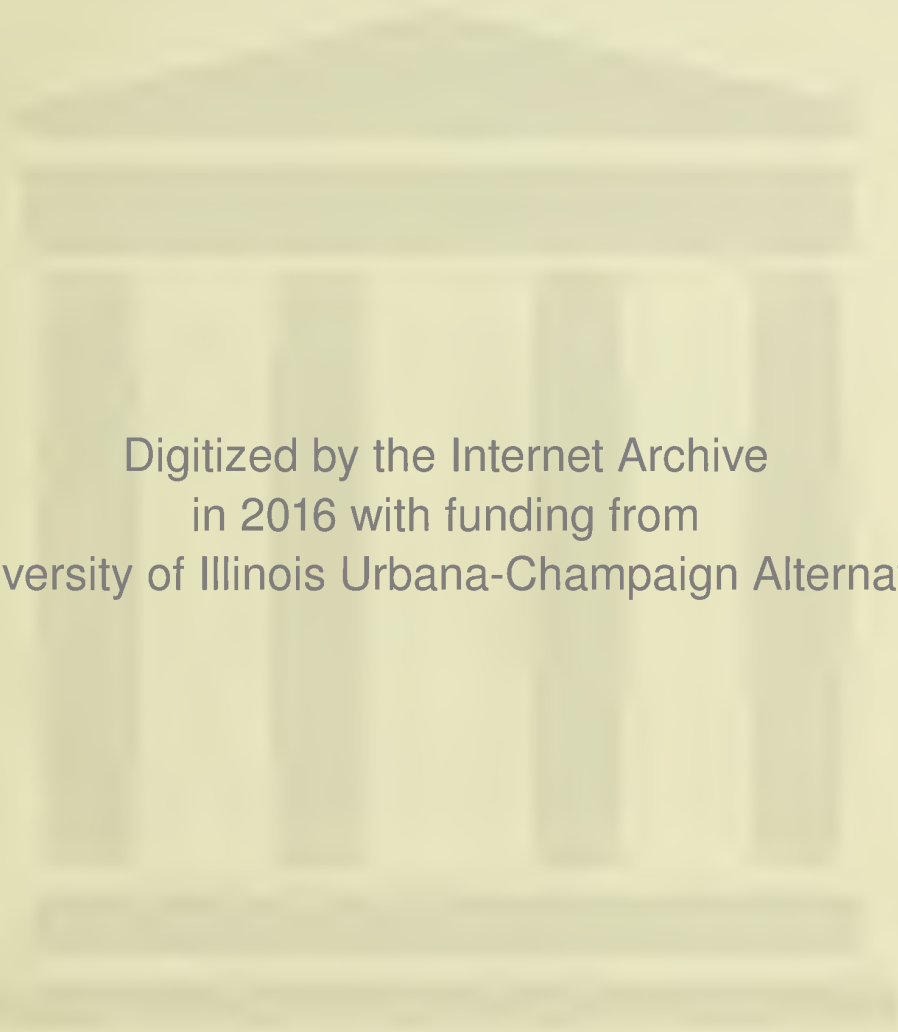


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HEAPS OF MONEY

SECOND VOLUME

HEAPS OF MONEY

BY

W. E. NORRIS

'Multa petentibus
Desunt multa: bene est cui deus obtulit
Parca quod satis est manu'

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1877

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HEAPS OF MONEY.

CHAPTER XIII.

POOR DEAR ADA.

The interest which Linda's relations had taken in her from the outset soon ripened into affection. Lady Sturdham liked her because she was so pretty, so quiet, dressed in such perfect taste, and was so thorough a little lady, although differing widely, in appearance as well as in thought and manner of expressing herself, from any of the ordinary English types. Lady Sturdham had a refined and cultivated taste, and appreciated rarity and beauty in the human race, as much as in old lace and china. The same causes, no doubt, had their effect upon 'Uncle Jim;' but he had taken to his

niece, in the first instance, because he had at once discerned her to be unaffected and truthful; besides which, there was something pathetic in her solitude and in her wealth which touched his kindly heart. He noticed that the girl often looked tired and sad; and more than once he fancied he could detect a redness about her eyelids, as if she had been crying. At such times he never enquired the reason of Linda's distress (for there was a substratum of tact beneath his rough exterior); but he would immediately begin to cast about him for some means of entertaining her, and diverting her thoughts from her trouble, whatever it might be, into some more lively channel.

As a rule his well-meant efforts were crowned with success; for Linda, though at this time she had various reasons for being anxious and ill at ease, was still young enough to be able to cast off her burden for an hour or two, and forget all about it till the time came for resuming it again.

'Are you fond of a circus?' Lord Sturdham asked her, abruptly, one evening, when she was

preparing to return home after dining with her uncle and aunt.

'Yes, I think I am,' answered Linda, smiling —'at least, as far as I can judge from the only one I ever saw.'

'So am I,' said Lord Sturdham, confidentially. 'I don't say so to your aunt, you know —she would consider me too old for that sort of amusement—but, between you and me, I think a good circus is capital fun. I see they are going to have one here to-morrow; and I shall try and get leave for two schoolboys whom I know, and take them there for the afternoon. I thought perhaps you might like to come with us.'

'I should, very much,' answered Linda.

'Very well; then I will call for you on our way.'

So Linda went; and, if she found the performance a little disappointing, derived, at all events, a good deal of pleasure from watching the delight of the small boys, and the undisguised glee of their grey-headed entertainer, who declared each successive feat of horseman-

ship to be 'marvellous, I do assure you—perfectly marvellous!' and who was thrown into convulsions of merriment by the time-honoured pleasantries of the clown.

Simple as he was in his tastes, Lord Sturdham was by no means a fool. He rarely spoke in the House of Lords; but when he did he was always listened to; for what little he said was clear, sensible, and to the point, and he never spoke without knowledge of his subject. He managed his estates well, had a good practical knowledge of farming, and a fair smattering of law, and, upon the whole, did his duty well in that state of life into which it had pleased God to call him. He liked a circus, however, and avowed his liking honestly. Why not? Who did not enjoy such exhibitions once upon a time? And if we can no longer feel pleasure in seeing a young woman jump through a paper hoop, and if some of us find it a hard matter to derive amusement from anything at all, I don't know that we have any reason to think ourselves intellectually Lord Sturdham's superiors on that account.

Linda, who was of a quietly observant disposition, came to love and respect her uncle more every day; and gradually there sprang up between them a tacit mutual understanding and friendship which is not likely to be disturbed on this side of the grave, and which, as one hopes, will last beyond it.

It need scarcely be said that Mr. Howard viewed this intimacy with unqualified approval. Nothing could be more satisfactory than that Linda should find herself upon such friendly terms with those of her relations who, by reason of their high social standing, ought to be able to obtain for her that position in London society which Mr. Howard was, very properly, desirous of securing for his daughter. And, if it had been within the range of his powers, we may be sure that he would have spared no pains to place himself upon an equally amicable footing with his brother-in-law. But unfortunately Mr. Howard's capabilities of producing a favourable impression were somewhat limited, and the greater the efforts he made to achieve this end, the less likely did he seem to succeed

in it. His innate vulgarity was speedily perceived by Lord Sturdham, who had never had reason to think well of his sister's husband, and whose early impressions were confirmed by certain reports which had reached his ears since his arrival in Brighton. Lord Sturdham disliked fast men—*a fortiori*, he abhorred fast old men; and Mr. Howard, with his dyed hair, his insinuating manner, his doubtful reputation, and his waxed moustache, struck him as one of the most objectionable persons he had ever come across.

Lady Sturdham entirely concurred. By ill luck it happened that, upon the occasion of her first visit to Linda, Mrs. Williams had been lunching with her friends, and was seated in the drawing-room. Mrs. Williams had had four glasses of sherry; she was a good deal flushed; her bonnet had somehow got pushed on the extreme back of her head; she wore a purple silk dress, and round her fat throat was a gold necklace from which depended a row of lockets enriched with precious stones. Previously to Lady Sturdham's entrance, she had been a

little disposed towards a siesta; but the advent of a real live countess roused her at once.

'I think we ought to know each other, Lady Sturdham,' said she, after she had been introduced to the august visitor. 'We met last season, if you remember, at Lady ——'s, and again at that delightful garden party at Chiswick. I think I had the pleasure of being introduced to you; but really I am not quite sure. One makes so many acquaintances in London, doesn't one?'

'I do not,' answered Lady Sturdham, frigidly. 'I go out very little, and only among my old friends.'

'Ah, how pleasant that must be!' said Mrs. Williams, with a fat sigh. 'I wish I could make some rule of that kind; for really I find my acquaintance gets so large that it is almost unmanageable. But there's my girls, you see. They are mad after balls and assemblies and concerts, and what not; and I do assure you I don't believe I could get them to spend a quiet evening at home, if I was to beg them ever so hard. I often say to them, "Well, girls, I

couldn't get on without you now ; but I declare to goodness, I sometimes envy people who have no children "—I do, indeed, Lady Sturdham. If one had never had any, one wouldn't miss them, you know.'

The remark was an unfortunate one. Lady Sturdham made no answer to it, unless a forced smile and a slight quivering of the head could be taken as a reply. She turned her shoulder a little more towards Mrs. Williams, and, addressing Linda, said—

'My dear, it is so mild this afternoon that I am going to take a short drive. Would it weary you very much to come and keep me company ? '

Linda said what politeness required, and departed without further delay, to put on her hat. She was not long absent ; but there was a sufficient interval between her leaving the room and returning to it to enable Mrs. Williams to express loud admiration of every article of clothing Lady Sturdham had on, from her bonnet to her gloves ; to ask the address of her modiste, and to enquire, with a

great show of interest, after the health of 'his lordship.'

'My dear, what a very dreadful person!' exclaimed Lady Sturdham, as soon as she had regained her carriage. 'I hope you do not make a friend of her.'

'No; not particularly,' answered Linda. 'That is, I don't like her very much myself; but papa does—and of course all his friends are mine.'

'Your papa'—began Lady Sturdham; and then broke off.

What was she going to say? Linda did not enquire, though perhaps she may have guessed, in what manner her aunt had intended to finish the sentence. It was, indeed, sufficiently evident that Mr. Howard was neither liked nor esteemed by his relatives; and of this Linda was perfectly aware. To change the subject, she asked some question about a Convalescent Home, in which she knew that her aunt, who was charitable and benevolent in an easy-going way, was interested; and Lady Sturdham, once started upon this congenial

topic, pursued it gently and unceasingly for half-an-hour, or more, the jog, jog of her fat horses beating a sober accompaniment to her talk.

Linda meanwhile thought her own thoughts, putting in a 'Yes' or a 'No' when it seemed to be expected that she should say something, and watched the sea-gulls circling and screaming over the tumbling green waves, and the tall houses with their windows ablaze from the sunset, and the wind-swept sky, and the parties of clattering equestrians, and the carriages, with their funnily-dressed occupants. To Linda's unaccustomed eyes the spectacle of her fellow-countrywomen's costumes was a source of never-failing astonishment and amusement.

Presently her own showy equipage dashed past at full speed. Mrs. Williams was sitting beside Mr. Howard, and Maria and Sophy occupied the opposite seat. The whole party nodded and kissed their hands repeatedly. Linda, while returning these amiable signals, stole a side-glance at her companion's face, and saw there a certain demure gravity and tightening of the lips of which it was not difficult to

interpret the meaning. That look said, as plainly as looks can speak, 'I tolerate your father, my dear, for your sake; but really you must not expect me to recognise all his vulgar friends.' And Linda, understanding this, sighed; for she foresaw that, sooner or later, she would have to take up the cudgels on her father's behalf; and she greatly feared that, when that time came, there would be an end to her intimacy with Lady Sturdham and kind old Uncle Jim. She was sorry to think that it should be so; but between her father and her new friends she could not hesitate, and she was fully prepared to resent any slight on the part of the latter towards the former. No such slight had as yet been offered, Lord and Lady Sturdham having been uniformly polite, though anything but cordial, to Mr. Howard; but that it would eventually come Linda had little doubt; and it was this conviction, among other things, that made her life less enjoyable to her than, according to all ordinary theories, it ought to have been.

But her great trouble was the change which

had come over Mr. Howard of late—a change to which Linda, much as she would have liked to do so, could no longer shut her eyes. He never displayed any sign of affection to his daughter now; he avoided being alone with her, and did not even address her when he could help it. His old pomposity of manner had disappeared, or only strutted forth on public occasions; and he was at no pains to conceal his mode of life, which was scarcely of a nature to reflect credit upon a sexagenarian. In truth, it is a hard matter for a father to borrow money continually of his child for the liquidation of gambling debts—and that 500*l.* of which mention has been made was not, unfortunately, the only sum recorded in Linda's cheque-book as having been made payable to the same person—it is barely possible, I say, for a father to accept such advances, and at the same time to preserve the sentiment of self-respect. It was not because Mr. Howard knew himself to be a dissipated old scoundrel that he cast off hypocrisy, and appeared in his true colours—gentlemen of his habits, who still contrive to

hold their heads high in the family circle, are not such rare phenomena—but, from the peculiar nature of his case, it was inevitable that his daughter should, to some extent, share that knowledge; and this it was that degraded Mr. Howard in his own estimation, and led him on towards a more undisguised indulgence of his desires than he might have ventured upon if he had still had a character to keep up.

I have heard it said that churches in which plates are used as a means of collecting the offertory, generally reap a larger harvest than those where bags have been substituted. The people who do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame, have always been in a very small minority in this humbug of a world; and who knows what temptations most of us might not have given way to, but for the wholesome dread of being found out?

Mr. Howard had not been altogether found out by his daughter—that pain has, happily, been spared to her up to the present time—but she knew that he often drank more wine than was good for him; she knew that he played

for heavy stakes with his friends of the 112th Dragoon Guards; she saw that, in spite of his painted cheeks and his dyed hair, he grew older-looking and more shaky every day; and she had to put up with a good deal of rudeness, unkindness, and occasional brutality from him.

All this did not lessen her love for her father; but it did, as a matter of course, diminish her belief and confidence in him; and many a night did she lie awake, the slow tears trickling down upon her pillow, while she bitterly deplored the stroke of so-called good fortune which had robbed her of what she valued far more than anything that money could bestow.

It was about this time that Lady Sturdham announced, one day, that she expected a young friend to stay a few weeks with her.

'I don't know whether you will like her, Linda,' said the old lady; 'James thinks her dreadfully fast; but if you would try and amuse her a little I should be so much obliged. What to do with her here I don't know; but I could not refuse Mrs. Tower—she is such a very old

friend of mine. She is obliged to go to one of her married daughters, who is ill, and there was a difficulty about disposing of Ada during her mamma's absence ——'

'Ada Tower!' interrupted Linda. 'That must be the Miss Tower who was in Dresden last winter.'

'In Dresden? Yes, to be sure, she was in Germany with her mother, I remember. So you knew them in Dresden. What a curious coincidence!'

'I didn't know them,' said Linda; 'but I often saw them.'

The coincidence struck her as more curious than agreeable. She was quite sure she should dislike Miss Tower, and had no desire to meet her. At the same time, she was not free from a natural, feminine exultation in the thought that that free-and-easy contemptuous young lady would now have to acknowledge her as an equal. Later in the evening, when, as usual, she was left to her own society and cogitations, she composed several politely sarcastic little speeches in anticipation of any impertinence in

which Lady Sturdham's guest might see fit to indulge.

None of these, however, were called into requisition. Miss Tower, when she made her appearance, was so cordial in her manner, so unaffectedly friendly, and apparently so unconscious of having given cause for previous offence, that it was impossible long to cherish the memory of affronts which, after all, as Linda now felt, might have been in great measure fancied. She was pleased to say that she recollected perfectly having seen Miss Howard in Dresden.

'I always wanted so much to know you,' she added, with that calmness of mendacity which nothing but a soothing assurance of immunity from detection can bestow; 'but mamma is so lazy about paying visits; and when we first went to Dresden we only meant to stay a week or two. We remained on, month after month, I don't quite know why; for it was as deadly dull a place as I ever was in in my life. How did you manage to kill time there? I don't remember seeing you at any of the Court balls.'

'No; I did not go out at all there,' answered Linda.

'Didn't you? I daresay you were right. Nothing could have been more slow than the native entertainments, I'm sure. Only one can't sit at home, twiddling one's thumbs, every night —at least I can't. When I find amusement is not to be had at any price, I go in for fatigue as being the next best thing; and nobody can say German balls are not sufficiently fatiguing. It seemed to me that they used to begin in the middle of the afternoon, and go on until late the next morning—but they were better than nothing. Some of the men were rather a joke, too, in their way. Did you know any of them—the officers, I mean?'

'One or two,' said Linda—'friends of papa's. We saw very few people. The truth is we were not well enough off, in those days, to entertain; and papa thought it was better not to accept hospitality which we could not return.'

'I am glad everybody does not think like Mr. Howard,' observed Miss Tower, with a short

laugh. 'What would become of us paupers if we had to pay back everything we received? But you need never hesitate to accept invitations any more. Lady Sturdham tells me you are rolling in riches.'

'Not quite that,' said Linda, modestly. But Miss Tower went on, without noticing the interruption —

'How fortunate you are! I should think you can have nothing in the world left to wish for. A woman who can get all her dresses from Worth—and pay for them—must be very hard to please if she is not contented. By-the-by, do you know your hair is done in the fashion of the year before last? I am rather good at hair-dressing—poor people like me have to learn these things—and if you like to send your maid to me, some morning, I shall be most happy to give her a lesson. You don't mind my telling you, do you?'

'I don't mind at all,' said Linda. 'It is very kind of you to give me some hints.'

And it was the more magnanimous in Linda to reply thus submissively because Miss Tower

happened to be mistaken with regard to that hair-dressing question.

This conversation took place on the evening after Miss Tower's arrival; Linda and Mr. Howard having been invited to dinner to meet her. Linda was not ill-disposed towards her new acquaintance. She was somewhat loud, it is true; she was a little too free-and-easy, and had an embarrassing way of putting direct questions when she wanted information; but these drawbacks were to a great extent made up for by her good-nature and her frank *bonhomie*.

'I think we shall be great friends,' said she, as she bade Linda good-night; 'and I hope we shall see a great deal of each other.'

To which Linda replied, with corresponding warmth, that she hoped so too. For it requires nothing short of personal experience to convince the majority of mankind of even the most elementary truths; and though nothing is more universally admitted than the rarity of disinterested friendship, I suppose that few girls of Linda's age—and, for that matter, not many young men either—would hesitate to believe

in the existence of such a phenomenon as displayed towards themselves. Miss Tower, between whom and unsuspecting youth intervened six London seasons and a vast accumulation of worldly knowledge, had made herself agreeable to Linda for three reasons. Firstly, because she had discovered that it always pays best, in the long run, to be civil to everybody; secondly, because a friend with a house in London and a generous disposition is likely to turn out useful in many ways; and thirdly—but Miss Tower's third motive will, in due course, become apparent.

Lady Sturdham was delighted to see that the two young people took to each other so naturally.

'Poor dear Ada!' she said. 'James says her merits are her own, and her faults are those of the age. I really think, my dear, there is a great deal of good in her, though, of course, I should be sorry to see you quite like her.'

The old lady thought it incumbent upon her to warn her niece that 'poor dear Ada'

was not in all respects a model to be imitated; but, having thus discharged her duty, she was only too glad to encourage an intimacy which promised to relieve her from the irksome task of entertaining a visitor whose tastes differed so completely from her own.

Miss Tower soon became Linda's most constant companion. She drove with her; she rode with her over the downs; she shared with her the attentions of Captains Browne and Greene (who, for their parts, found her society much more to their taste than that of the quiet little heiress); she was fascinating to Mr. Howard, gracious to Mrs. Williams, and, in short, made herself an indispensable part and parcel of Linda's household.

At the end of a week Linda took courage to put a question which had been trembling upon her lips ever since her first introduction to this popular lady.

'You used to know a Mr. Mainwairing in Dresden, didn't you?' she asked.

'George Mainwairing? I should think so! I have known him ever since we were children

together, down in Staffordshire, a hundred years ago. Why do you ask?'

It was a grey November afternoon, and the two ladies were sitting alone together over their tea. The daylight was fast fading away; but by the light of a blazing fire, Linda could see Miss Tower's blue eyes were fixed upon her with a steady scrutiny which was rather disconcerting.

'We saw a good deal of him last winter,' she answered, as carelessly as she could. 'I thought perhaps you might know what had become of him.'

'I had a letter from him,' said Miss Tower, deliberately. 'Let me see—was it last week or the week before? I think it was last week.' And she paused to see what the effect of that shot would be.

'Oh!' said Linda, poking the fire. 'And where was he then?'

'He was then in Canada, and likely to stay there some time, I fancy,' answered Miss Tower, mentally scoring one.

'In Canada!' echoed Linda, blankly. Con-

scious that Miss Tower was surveying her enquiringly and with a faint ironical smile upon her handsome face, she would have given a good deal to be able to receive this information with a greater show of equanimity; but the blow was too sudden and unexpected. For the moment she could control neither her features nor her voice; so she sat silent, and contemplated the glowing coals.

'Did you not know?' asked Miss Tower, at length.

'No,' said Linda; 'I thought he intended to come home. The last time I saw him he talked of returning to England.'

'Did he? But George is such an erratic being. You never can tell one day where he will be the next. His going off to Canada was quite a sudden freak. He is always rushing about the world, as if the devil was after him—it is his idea of pleasure. I am afraid his going has been a disappointment to you in this instance,' she added, meaningly.

'Yes,' replied Linda, steadily, raising her eyes, and looking her interrogator fairly in the face;

'I am very sorry he has gone. I liked him so much; and he was one of the very few real friends I have in the world.'

'Really!' said Miss Tower, raising her eyebrows; 'I should not have thought you would have had time to develope an undying friendship in so few months. But George is so absurdly impulsive.'

This ungracious speech did not seem to call for a rejoinder; and a long pause ensued, during which Linda had leisure to couple the circumstance of Miss Tower being in correspondence with Mainwairing with that of her always mentioning him by his Christian name, and to draw what conclusions she pleased from these facts. Her meditations were brusquely interrupted by the sound of Miss Tower's high-pitched voice.

'What is the good of our beating about the bush?' said she. 'Don't let us try to humbug one another. I heard all about your flirtation with George—he is such a susceptible fellow!—and the duel, and the account in the newspaper, and all the rest of it. Honestly, now—you have

known me long enough to be able to trust me—have you any real *tendresse* in that quarter?'

Linda blushed, more with anger than with confusion; but she answered, calmly enough—

'There never was any flirtation between Mr. Mainwairing and me. The duel was provoked by Herr von Oberndorf, and the story in the newspaper was too ridiculous for anyone to notice. Mr. Mainwairing used to come to our house to practise his violin, because I knew how to play his accompaniments; and he was very kind, and I liked him very much—that was all.'

'Of course you need not trust me unless you like: it is always safest to trust nobody,' said Miss Tower, in a would-be injured tone, through which an undercurrent of relief was discernible.

'I was telling you nothing but the truth,' said Linda, a little wearily. 'I daresay people may have thought that, because Mr. Mainwairing came to see us so often, he meant something more than mere friendliness; but it was not so. Indeed,' she added, thinking perhaps that it was

time to carry the war into the enemy's country, 'I used to think that, some day or other, he would marry you. I remember telling him so once.'

'And what did he say?' enquired Miss Tower, taking up a hand-screen to shelter her face from the fire.

'I don't exactly recollect,' answered Linda, across whose memory Mainwairing's actual words had suddenly flashed with a vividness that confused her a little. 'I think he said Mrs. Tower would not consider him a sufficiently good match, or something of that kind.'

Miss Tower laughed, and fanned herself lazily with her screen.

'He was not far wrong there,' she said. 'Poor old George! Mamma wants me to marry money: she says I should never do for a poor man's wife; and I entirely agree with her. The misfortune is that rich men of domestic tastes are not quite so plentiful as one could wish them to be. It will end in my dying an old maid, I daresay.'

'But if Mr. Mainwairing were rich'—suggested Linda, after an interval of silence.

'That would alter the case, of course. Nothing is more absolutely essential than that I should secure an establishment of some kind. My mother is not immortal; and when she dies, I shall be much worse off than I am now. At my age, the matter is simple enough. I must take the first man with a reasonable income who is fool enough to propose to me.'

Linda made an involuntary movement of disgust.

'It is a sordid view to take of matrimony, isn't it?' said Miss Tower, coolly; 'but it is not the more so for being honestly stated. Everybody has to swallow a certain amount of dirt in his life; and I don't know that pretending it was not dirt would make it taste any better. I can't afford to pick and choose. If I could——'

'You would choose Mr. Mainwairing.'

'Well—perhaps.'

There was another pause of a few minutes. Then Miss Tower resumed, speaking in a half-laughing, half-confused manner very unusual with her—

'I don't know why I should tell you, except that I feel inclined to be confidential this

evening, and—and I know you will not repeat it; but the truth is I am fonder of George Mainwairing than of anybody else in the world. He did like me once, I think—long ago, when we were still almost children. He used to give me presents, and dance the whole evening with me, and that. It was only calf-love, I suppose; but, somehow or other, I have never quite got rid of it. Sometimes I think I should not mind giving up everything and everybody, and starving with him on his bachelor's income down in some little hole in the country, with no society but the squire's wife and the parson's daughters, and nothing to do except to keep house and darn his socks.'

'If I cared for him so much as that,' said Linda, quietly, 'I should never marry anyone else.'

'Ah, but he has not asked me, you see; and who knows whether he ever will? He is just the sort of man to take a sudden fancy to some Canadian girl, and marry her out of hand. You know he really was smitten with you in Dresden; and indeed I don't know that you are

not a little bit dangerous yet. I suppose prudence restrained him from committing himself in those days; but when he comes back to England, and hears what a first-rate match you have become, he may find you irresistible.'

'You seem to forget that he would have to consult me,' said Linda, coldly. 'And why should you suppose him so mercenary?' she continued, with more warmth. 'I don't think he cares in the least for money.'

'All men are mercenary, my dear,' replied Miss Tower, in a tone of calm conviction; 'and so are nine women out of ten. It is our fallen nature.'

'And yet you say you would marry him, poor as he is.'

'I don't say positively that I would; I might. Besides, his brother will never marry, and there is a good prospect of his dying before long. He is a poor, delicate creature, who is always damaging himself with scientific experiments,' said Miss Tower, naïvely. 'George has a very fair chance —— Oh, how do you do, Captain Browne? If you search about

in the dark on the other side of the fire-place, you will find Miss Howard somewhere in an arm-chair. She will be delighted to see you, if she is awake; but we have been boring one another so exquisitely for the last hour, that I am not quite sure whether she has not dropped into a refreshing slumber.'

'No, really?' said the gallant plunger whose entrance had caused this sudden interruption to Miss Tower's confidences. 'How do you do, Miss Howard? Upon my word, now, I shouldn't have thought it would have been possible to be bored in the society of either of you.'

And then, having got through what he conceived to be a neat speech, Captain Browne sat down, pulled out his wristbands, stroked his moustache, and prepared to be entertained—conversation not being his strong point.

Some time later, when both her visitors had departed, Linda walked slowly into her bedroom, locking the door behind her, and sank into a chair beside the newly-lighted fire, with a sigh of exhaustion. She had had to put a strong restraint upon herself for two hours or

more, and now that it was removed her strength seemed suddenly to give way. She began to cry quietly and noiselessly, the big tear-drops running down her cheeks and leaving a stain upon the front of her pale grey silk dress. It did not matter. She had plenty more silk dresses; and, in her present mood, it would have been pretty much the same thing to her if she had not.

What was she crying about? That was exactly the question which she asked herself, with some indignation, as she dipped her face into the basin and essayed to wash away the traces of her tears. Was it because Mr. Mainwairing had seen fit to cross the Atlantic? Certainly not. Was it because Miss Tower's unpleasant insinuations had annoyed her, and made her feel that there must needs be an awkward restraint between her and the violinist when they met again—if they ever should meet again? Well, perhaps. It is hard that one should lose one's friends on account of the gossip of silly people—'and I have so few real friends,' thought poor Linda, sadly. Yes, it

was partly that; and partly that England was dull, and the weather wretched, and papa cross, and everything generally vanity and vexation of spirit.

'I suppose no one would believe it,' said Linda, as she dried her face; 'but I wish—I do wish, with all my heart—that Uncle Thomas had left his money to a hospital.'

CHAPTER XIV.

LADY GRASSMERE.

It was a great grief to Linda when Lady Sturdham's doctor pronounced his patient sufficiently restored to health to be able to leave Brighton.

'The best of friends must part, my dear,' said Lord Sturdham when he came to say good-bye; 'but we shall meet again in London in the course of a few months, and when the summer comes I hope we shall get you to come down and stay with us at Beechlands—you and your father. You will find it very dull, Howard: we are quiet people, and live in a very quiet way.'

Mr. Howard protested, in his most urbane manner, that the society of Lady Sturdham and his brother-in-law must of itself suffice to pre-

vent any place from being dull; and he was going on to say with what melancholy interest he should visit the scenes amid which poor dear Helen's childhood had been passed; but Lord Sturdham cut him short with a grunt.

'Well, good-bye, Howard,' said he—'Glad to have seen you. Good-bye, my dear, and God bless you.'

And now for the first time since he had made his niece's acquaintance, Lord Sturdham bent forward, and saluted her with a resounding and stubbly kiss upon the forehead. After which, he picked up his hat and stick, and vanished with his usual precipitation.

Mrs. Williams, who happened to be present at this little scene, was deeply impressed by it.

'It is of the greatest importance to a girl entering society,' said she, solemnly, 'to have a few really good introductions. Lord Sturdham is in the very best set—quite the inner circle, you know—and he seems to have taken a great fancy to Linda and you, Mr. Howard. I do hope you won't let him forget you. You must get Lady Sturdham to present you at Court, my

dear. I should have been glad to do that for you myself, but perhaps it would be more suitable that you should be introduced by a relation. And I am not a countess,' said Mrs. Williams, modestly. 'Her Majesty kisses countesses when she receives them,' added the loyal lady, in a tone of much awe and reverence.

'Odd custom, isn't it?' remarked Mr. Howard, standing with his back to the fire, and rubbing his hands. He was not ill-pleased at Mrs. Williams' manifestation of proper respect to the aristocracy of the land, and liked to think that he had near connections in that august body.

'Perhaps, one of these days, you may be a countess yourself, Linda, and arrive at the distinction of being kissed by the Queen,' he said, pleasantly.

Linda did not notice the remark. She had seated herself in the bow-window, and was gazing after the rapidly-diminishing figure of a stout old gentleman who was hurrying away along the pavement. 'Dear old man! how

sorry I am he has gone!' she exclaimed, aloud; and both Mr. Howard and Mrs. Williams echoed her regret, though it cannot be said that Lord Sturdham's absence was likely to create so great a void in their daily lives as in that of the niece, whose constant companion he had of late become, and who had learnt to lean upon his unspoken sympathy more than she herself suspected until the moment of parting came.

Ada Tower was but a poor substitute for Uncle Jim. Still she was better than nobody —better, also, than the Williams family, whom she pitilessly snubbed, and who generally fled, on her approach, like chickens before a fox. If Miss Tower had no other merit, she had at least that of being able to drive away these unwelcome visitors. When, therefore, shortly before the day fixed for the departure of the Sturdhams, she had kindly offered to stay a week or so with Linda, the self-invited guest had been welcomed with alacrity. She came, bringing with her a formidable supply of trunks and portmanteaus, and stayed longer than a week or

so, as it turned out. Brighton was more amusing to her than the country at that season of the year, and her hostess was very glad to keep her as long as she chose to remain.

Perhaps, if she had known it, Linda's chief pleasure in the vicinity of the fair Ada lay in the opportunity thus afforded to her of asking questions and receiving information with reference to the absent Mainwairing. Just as, if you are afflicted with an ache or a pain in any part of your body, a perverse impulse will perpetually prompt you to lay your finger upon the painful spot till you wince under the pressure, so Linda found a mixture of pleasure and pain in constantly recurring to a subject which she would have done more wisely to let alone.

Had Miss Tower been a little less self-engrossed, her original jealousy of Linda might probably have been re-awakened; but, happily for both parties concerned, Ada was not suspicious, nor, throughout her lengthened stay, did anything occur to disturb the alliance between the two ladies.

It was a great boon to Linda to have a

companion to drive and walk with her, and to assist her in making small-talk for the entertainment of her visitors; and if Miss Tower was not precisely the one of all others whom she would have chosen for a familiar friend, she was perhaps not much worse off in that respect than the rest of the world. If we only made associates of those who realised our ideal, how very little some of us would see of our fellow creatures, and how few opportunities we should have for exhibiting that fine quality of toleration for the infirmities of others which most of us flatter ourselves that we possess!

Miss Tower must have been very tolerant, for she not only put up with Mr. Howard, but was at some pains to ingratiate herself with him, listening, without apparent fatigue, to his egotistical anecdotes, and often delighting him with little doses of flattery, such as his soul loved. Indeed, she was generally good-humoured with people who did not rub her the wrong way, and sometimes even with people who did. Mrs. Williams, it is true, met with scant mercy at her hands; but then there was

nothing whatever to be gained, in the present or in the future, by being polite to Mrs. Williams.

'I don't know what ails the girl,' sighed that ill-used lady one day; but she is always setting me down, or turning me into ridicule. I declare I daren't so much as open my lips when she is in the room. Why can't she let me be?'

Linda, who was the recipient of this plaint, said she was very sorry.

'Oh, don't you trouble yourself, my dear!' retorted Mrs. Williams, with a toss of her feathered bonnet. 'I can take very good care of myself, thank goodness! Miss Tower may think herself a mighty fine lady; but I am not one to put up with airs—and so you can tell her, my dear, whenever you please. Those who don't mind swallowing impertinence may receive her if they like; but she don't enter *my* house till she mends her manners—that's flat!'

Nevertheless, when Mrs. Williams sent out cards for a large ball, shortly afterwards, she included Miss Tower among the number of the

invited. 'I couldn't well leave her out without being rude to the Howards,' she remarked apologetically to her eldest daughter, who was addressing her envelopes; 'but if she has any delicacy of feeling she will decline.' She did not decline, however; she went; and probably cared very little whether her hostess thought her wanting in delicacy of feeling or not.

The ball was a very grand one, and a success, in so far as unlimited expenditure could make it so. It was Linda's first ball—an event to which she had looked forward ever since she had first learnt to dance, years back, at Signor Rosati's class in Florence, where she had been at once the best waltzer and the most shabbily-dressed member of that accomplished gentleman's squad of pupils. Many and many a time had Linda, building Spanish castles in her solitary rambles among the sunny avenues of the Boboli gardens, or during the long evenings when, for economical reasons, she sat in semi-darkness beside the wood fire, pictured to herself her *début* in the ball-room, the crowd of partners who would doubtless flock to inscribe

their names on her card, the simple elegance of her toilette, and the triumph of being engaged for every dance. That was in the old days, when she had had nothing but her own charms to count upon as a means of securing admirers, and when a white muslin dress, prettily made and trimmed, would have satisfied her utmost ambition. But now that the long-wished-for occasion had arrived, and that muslin might be replaced by corded silk and Brussels lace, and that partners were not likely to be lacking—behold! she had no heart for dancing, and would fain have escaped from the ordeal of showing herself in public, had escape been by any means attainable. Truly it is a disappointing world; and few mortals get what they wish for in it, or care about it when they have got it. Linda, who had obtained the object of her desires, and found it to be something altogether different from what she had expected, was too low-spirited, at this time, to take any interest even in the charming costume which a fashionable London dressmaker had sent her down for the occasion, and submitted herself to the hands

of her maid, to be dressed for Mrs. Williams's ball, with no other sensation than an intense longing to go to bed.

But this was only a transient feeling. She had no sooner made her way into the improvised ball-room than the hot, scented air, the multitude of wax lights, the music, and the crowd of well-dressed people began to affect her senses with a pleasurable excitement; and, by the time that she had come to the end of her first waltz with Captain Browne, she was forced, rather unwillingly, to admit to herself that the world was not, after all, quite the utter desert she had imagined it to be. Of course her card was filled up before she had been ten minutes in the room. It would have been so if she had been old, ugly, and repulsive; but as she was young, pretty, exquisitely dressed and a perfect dancer, let us hope that there were a few disinterested people among Mrs. Williams' guests who would have been equally eager to engage her had she been only the daughter of the penniless Dresden adventurer instead of the great heiress about whom all Brighton was talking.

Linda was easily depressed and easily elated. The music, the rythmic movement, the Babel of voices, the silly, halting compliments of her partners—all these acted upon her nerves, and excited her, as a little wine will affect the brain of one who has been long fasting. Her eyes sparkled, a faint flush appeared on her cheeks, and she began to talk and laugh with a vivacity which rather surprised Miss Tower, who, with languid curiosity, had kept an eye on the *débutante*.

'I should like to go to a ball every night of my life!' she exclaimed, towards the close of the evening.

'Would you?' said Captain Browne, who happened to be her companion at the time. 'That would be rather too much of a good thing, wouldn't it?'

'To you, perhaps, because you have so many other ways of amusing yourself. Men have the best of it in everything. But we have it, to some extent, our own way in a ball-room. You allow us to take part in some of your other pleasures as a favour; but you have

to ask us to dance with you; and sometimes we are able to decline.'

'Ah, I expect you like that,' grumbled the dragoon. 'You are always declining to dance with me, I know.'

'I would as soon dance with you as anybody else,' said Linda, simply; 'but one can't dance the whole evening with one person. I have given you three dances; isn't that enough?'

'Not half enough. I should have liked a couple of dozen. Give me one extra one—that only makes four—at the next dance you go to—will you?'

'When and where will that be?' said Linda, laughing. 'This is the first time I have danced in Brighton; and I should think it will probably be the last. You shall have your four dances, and welcome, if you will find me an opportunity of giving them to you.'

'I will get our fellows to give a dance,' said the accommodating Captain Browne. 'It is time we did something, upon my honour.'

And he was as good as his word. The

112th ball, which took place shortly afterwards, is still remembered at Brighton as one of the most brilliant military entertainments ever given in that gay town; and it is memorable as regards the persons treated of in this history, inasmuch as the occasion was thought fitting by Captains Browne and Greene for the declaration of those sentiments which they had long been seeking for an opportunity to express to Miss Howard.

It is needless to say that neither of these gentlemen received the answer which he had hoped for; but Linda's chance of becoming a soldier's bride was not yet finally lost; for, within a week, she received an offer of marriage from the colonel of the regiment, and also from young Whyte, who, having unfortunately been turned out of his dog-cart on his way back from some local steeple-chases, and so cut about the face as to be unpresentable in ladies' society, was fain to avow his passion by letter.

Miss Tower laughed when she heard of these disinterested proposals. 'This is only a preliminary canter,' she said. 'When you get

to London the serious running will begin. By next June you will be getting, I should say, something like half-a-dozen offers a week. But with your face and your fortune, you oughtn't to look at anything under the eldest son of a duke.'

'It will be very much the same thing to me who proposes to me,' answered Linda, composedly. 'I don't mean to marry at all.'

Whereat Miss Tower laughed again.

Before the month of February was over, Ada, with many assurances of regret and friendship, took leave of her dear Linda. She had several engagements to stay at country-houses, she said, which could no longer be postponed. So she went; and was more missed than perhaps she deserved to be. Miss Tower, if not a devoted friend, had at least been good company; and even had she been less good-humoured and less amusing than she was, she would still have been welcome to a solitary little maiden lady, who could not eat her dinner alone in comfort because of the embarrassing presence of a butler and footman, and who was too much given to brooding over the troubles

of this life when no one was at hand to rouse her into forgetfulness of them.

After Ada's departure, Linda soon got heartily sick of Brighton, and longed to return to her own home. Nor had she long to wait for the desired permission. Towards the end of March, Parliament being in full wrangle, and the first drawing-room of the season announced, Mr. Howard conceived that the time had come when fashionable people might with propriety be seen in the metropolis, and issued an edict for the breaking up of the Brighton establishment accordingly.

Linda re-entered her spacious and somewhat gloomy mansion at Lancaster Gate much as a boy arrives for the first time at a public school. She was upon the threshold of novel experiences, and her curiosity to see for herself that London society which was as yet only known to her by hearsay was tempered by a trembling doubt as to how she should manage to acquit herself in it. Ada Tower had often laughed at her, not unkindly, for certain little foreign tricks of language and gesture, and had advised her

to get rid of them before making her *début* in London, assuring her of what, indeed, was confirmed by her own observation, that the English, though the greatest travellers in the world, are of all nations the most prejudiced, and the least tolerant of what they are pleased to consider solecisms in manners. Mindful of this friendly counsel, Linda resolved that she would maintain an attitude of observant caution until such time as she should feel herself able to satisfy London by a close imitation of the demeanour of its inhabitants.

What she was not at all prepared for was that London should ignore her altogether. Ever since her arrival in England, the importance of her position as one of the great heiresses of the day had been so persistently dinned into her ears that she had, very excusably, taken it for granted that, in some unexplained manner, she would find herself in a whirlpool of gaiety from the moment she reached the capital. So vast, however, is the extent of the British metropolis, and so imperfect are its means of communication, that even a young lady of pre-

possessing exterior and a fortune of eighteen thousand a year may lie concealed in its hospitable bosom for weeks together. It is true that such concealment is not likely to be permanent; but of this Linda had no reason to be convinced; and when a fortnight had elapsed without producing any visitors except the inevitable Mrs. Williams, who had taken a house at South Kensington for the season, she began to resign herself to the prospect of an even more complete solitude in London than she had experienced in Brighton.

The move did not cause Mr. Howard to become more domestic in his habits. He usually left the house immediately after breakfast, and seldom showed himself again before the dinner-hour. Not unfrequently he dined at his club, where he had a few acquaintances, picked up at Newmarket, and elsewhere, in the course of the past summer and autumn. To Linda and her pursuits, he appeared to be absolutely indifferent; nor, though she tried, by various little harmless stratagems, to keep her father more at home, was she in any instance rewarded

by success. Once she asked him to take her to a concert at St. James's Hall; but he consented with so bad a grace, and was so snappish the whole afternoon, that she did not repeat the experiment.

'Of course he likes better to be with other men than with me—that is only natural,' she said to herself. But she sighed as she said it. Time was when Mr. Howard had taken her to concerts without grumbling.

The late owner of the house in Lancaster Gate had furnished his dwelling-place with a view rather to splendour than to comfort. He himself had lived almost entirely in three rooms, and had never been in the habit of entering his gorgeous drawing-room, save at such times as he had had a score or so of city magnates and their wives to dine with him. The consequence was that when Linda entered upon her inheritance, she found this vast apartment a triumph of magnificent upholstery, but inconvertible into a comfortable or pretty sitting-room by any amount of shifting and re-arranging of furniture. The simplest plan

would have been to dismantle the room and furnish it over again ; but Linda's economically-educated mind revolted against such drastic reforms; and indeed the sofas and chairs were quite smart and new, and must have cost a great deal of money.

So Linda established herself and her small belongings in a windowed recess, which she beautified by means of flowers, and there dwelt, as in an oasis, surrounded by a waste of crimson brocaded satin and ormolu, and three-pile Axminster. Here she would sit by the hour together, sometimes working a little, sometimes reading a book; but very frequently doing nothing at all, her hands lying listlessly on her lap, and her half-conscious eyes gazing out at the tossing branches of the trees in Kensington Gardens, and the clouds of dust swirling along the road before the east wind, and the never-ending stream of cabs, omnibuses and carriages.

Now, it came to pass that, while Miss Howard was thus wasting her time, one chilly April afternoon, she was astonished to see a

brougham, drawn by a pair of high-stepping horses, dash up to her door. A powdered footman got down and rang the bell, and shortly afterwards a lady emerged from the carriage, and entered the house. Linda was conscious of an agreeable expectant thrill. Had London society become aware of her existence at last?

Presently Hudson's voice was heard from the far end of the long drawing-room, announcing, 'Countess of Grassmere.'

While the lady thus announced was slowly and composedly making her way towards the window, Linda had time to wonder whether by any chance the stranger had made a mistake, and found her way into the wrong house; but it soon appeared that there was no ground for this apprehension; for Lady Grassmere at once held out her hand, saying, 'How do you do, Miss Howard?' and, having settled herself in a low easy-chair, began to talk about the weather, in a slow, languid tone, as though her presence required no explanation.

She was a handsome woman, dressed in the

height of the fashion, with a gracefully rounded girlish figure, an abundance of brown hair, which she wore in little curls, low down on her forehead, and a complexion too beautiful to be altogether natural. Her age might have been anything. After studying her closely in a strong light, Linda set her down at a trifle on the wrong side of forty, and was astounded at discovering, by a subsequent reference to the peerage, that her ladyship was in her fifty-seventh year.

It was not unti the conversation had lasted five minutes or so, that Lady Grassmere thought fit to mention casually that she had heard of Miss Howard's arrival in London from her friend, Lady Sturdham—'who is your aunt, I think, is she not?'

'Yes,' said Linda. 'Did she ask you to come and see me? How kind of her! Will they be coming to town, soon?'

'I don't think they will be up for a week or two,' answered Lady Grassmere. 'Lord Sturdham has had the gout, and will have to keep quiet for a time. In the meantime, you

should ever want a chaperon to take you anywhere, I am sure I shall be most happy——'

'Oh, thank you,' said Linda; 'you are very kind. But I never go out. I know nobody in London,' she added, with a little sigh.

'I daresay you will have plenty of going out by-and-by,' said Lady Grassmere. 'Are you fond of that kind of thing?'

'Yes,' said Linda—'that is, I hardly know. The first ball I ever went to was at Brighton, the other day.'

'Ah! Didn't Lady Sturdham tell me you had been educated abroad? In a convent perhaps?'

'Oh, no; we are Protestants. I believe one side of our family is Roman Catholic; but they are only distant relations,' said Linda, in perfect good faith.

A momentary gleam of amusement swept across Lady Grassmere's impassive countenance, and vanished.

'I am glad you are not a Catholic,' she said, gravely. 'Not that I have any sectarian prejudices myself; but I think mixed marriages—I

mean, as you will probably marry a member of the Established Church, it would be as well that you should belong to the same religion as your husband. You are not of age yet, are you?'

'Only nineteen,' answered Linda, smiling. She was beginning to wonder whether it was the fashion in London society to catechise new acquaintances in this unreserved manner. But at this juncture the entrance of Mr. Howard put an end to Lady Grassmere's questionings.

Mr. Howard greeted his daughter's visitor with respectful cordiality. 'He had had the pleasure,' he said, 'of meeting her ladyship's eldest son, Lord Keswick, at the Windsor steeple-chases, where he rode uncommonly well, and must have won, if that awkward brute hadn't knocked up against him.'

'Did any one knock up against him?' asked Lady Grassmere, languidly. 'I did not hear of it; but he is always coming to grief in some way, poor boy! Young men, Miss Howard, are always in trouble of one kind or another. Some of them sit up all night playing cards;

others make love to their neighbours' wives; others, like my son, ride in steeple-chases, and break their bones. A nephew of mine, who has just left Oxford, is breaking his mother's heart by ritualistic practices. He illuminates texts all day long, says a Latin grace before dinner, and has fitted up an oratory—with flowers and lights and things, you know—in the cupboard which opens out of his study. They tell me that he had lit all his candles, the other day, and was going to have a grand function in honour of some departed saint, when the whole thing took fire, and blazed up, and the house was within an ace of being burnt down. It is the enthusiasm of youth, I suppose, which is sure to manifest itself in this form or in that. I don't know that steeple-chasing is more dangerous than other pursuits; and it is certainly healthy. How beautiful your flowers are! Don't you find it difficult to get them at this time of year? We have ours constantly sent up from the country. Would you like me to send you a basketful to-morrow?'

Linda thought Lady Grassmere very kind

and obliging. It did seem a little odd that so much interest should be displayed in a total stranger; but that might arise from affection for Lady Sturdham, or perhaps be merely the outward sign of a naturally benevolent disposition. Linda would have been not a little astonished if she could have overheard a short colloquy which took place on the staircase, a few minutes later, between her respected father and the amiable countess.

Said the latter, directly the drawing-room door had closed behind her—'I am quite enchanted with your daughter. So pretty and lady-like and natural, and-er-innocent!'

Mr. Howard replied gravely that his daughter had been very carefully brought up, and that she inherited the sweet disposition of her mother, Lady Helen Blount, to whom, indeed, she was considered to bear a strong personal resemblance.

'Ah, yes—really?' said Lady Grassmere, who perhaps did not feel any vivid interest in the late Lady Helen. She paused on the landing, and, resting in a graceful attitude, with one

beautifully-gloved little hand on the banister, approached a subject more important in her estimation.

'You were speaking, just now, of my son,' she said. 'He is the best boy in the world; but he has been very extravagant, I am sorry to say, and has had losses which—which make it especially desirable he should marry a fortune. You, of course, would wish your daughter to make what is called a brilliant match. Now, does it not seem as if an arrangement might be made which would meet both your wishes and ours admirably in every respect?'

Mr. Howard was not squeamish; but the coolness with which this bargain was offered staggered even him for a moment.

'Really, Lady Grassmere, this is very sudden,' he said.

'So it is; and I ought perhaps to apologise. Only it is so very important to initiate matters of this kind in time.'

'I don't see the necessity for hurry so far as my daughter is concerned,' observed Mr. Howard.

'Well; you will think it over; and I hope we shall meet again soon. I have merely thrown out a *suggestion*, you understand—nothing more; and I need not say that I have spoken in strict confidence, and that not a creature knows of my little scheme. Pray don't trouble to come down-stairs. Good-bye.'

And Lady Grassmere drove home, and reported to her husband that the girl would do very well, and that the father was not so objectionable as he had been made out to be.

As for Mr. Howard, he stuck his hands into his pockets, betook himself to the library, and sat down to consider the matter dispassionately. Linda's marriage, whenever and with whomsoever it took place, must be disadvantageous to him from a pecuniary point of view; but he had never entertained the notion of inducing her to remain single; nor did he now greatly desire that she should do so. He thought that, with careful management, he could always count upon receiving three thousand a year from his daughter; and this comforting assurance, combined with the working out of a

certain project which, at this time, was beginning to mature itself in his mind, disposed him to look not unfavourably upon Lady Grassmere's proposal. He took down the peerage from its shelf, and turned to 'GRASSMERE, Charles James Fitz-Rupert, K.G., 9th earl. Born 18—; succeeded his father 18—' &c. &c. &c. Mr. Howard skimmed rapidly over the record of the different high offices held, from time to time, by Lord Grassmere, and went on to the small print. '*Son*,—Charles, de Grey, Viscount Keswick, born 18— was educated at Eton; entered the Royal Horse Guards, as Cornet, 18—; Lieut. 18—; retired 18—; is a Captain in the Royal South Cumberland Yeomany Cavalry. *Town residence*, A. 120, Albany, Piccadilly, W.'

There was not much information to be got out of that; but it was reassuring to find it stated lower down that Lord Grassmere possessed three estates in different parts of England, besides an Irish castle and a house in Belgrave Square.

'H'm! one might do worse,' soliloquised

Mr. Howard. 'Evidently the young fellow is hard up; but they are well-known people—very well-known people. Anyhow, it is well worth considering.'

He dined at home that evening, and rejoiced Linda's heart by his good-humour and kindliness. Already he saw in her a potential viscountess, and respected her accordingly.

CHAPTER XV.

LORD KESWICK.

A YOUNG man whose friends have accustomed him, from his youth up, to regard sovereigns merely as a convenient species of counter, obtainable whenever and in whatsoever quantity desired, cannot reasonably be expected to have any definite ideas as to the means of confining his expenditure within the limits of his income; and should the father of such a young man find long bills coming in to him for articles supplied to his son, he ought to pay them without a murmur, remembering that he has only himself to thank for this annoyance. Parents, however, are not, as a rule, disposed to impute blame to themselves any more than the rest of humanity, and Lord Grassmere, when he had paid away nearly twenty-thousand pounds on his son's

behalf, was sufficiently illogical to consider himself a hardly-used man.

As an Eton boy, Lord Keswick, when he happened to take a fancy to anything, immediately ordered it to be sent to him at his tutor's, and put his hand into his pocket to pay for it. If, by any chance, he found nothing there, he wrote to his father mentioning the fact, and the deficiency was supplied. Later in life, when he was serving her Majesty as a cornet in the Blues, and had a banker's account of his own, he simply wrote a cheque for any sum that might be required of him, and thought no more about it. He was a handsome, merry little fellow, with a round boyish face, whom everybody knew, everybody liked, and whom, it is to be feared, not a few people swindled. Being of a free and generous nature and of extremely expensive tastes, it is probable that he might have found himself in difficulties very early in life, if it had not been for the accident of a rich relation dying suddenly, and leaving him the undisputed control of a very comfortable fortune There was no reason why this

unexpected windfall should have caused Lord Keswick to leave his regiment at the early age of three-and-twenty; but he did so, thinking that, upon the whole, it would be better fun to be completely his own master, and that the liberty thus acquired would afford him more leisure for the supervision of his racing-stud, which was then in course of formation.

He spent a good deal of his capital in the purchase of yearlings, which afterwards, in the most unaccountable manner, turned out to be utterly valueless; but what was still worse was that he never could be convinced of the worthlessness of his own animals till he had heaped his money upon them, and lost it. It may have been bad judgment, or it may, as he himself always declared, have been bad luck; but certain it is that Lord Keswick's turf career was a most disastrous one; and it soon came to be a standing joke among his intimates that not one of Keswick's horses had ever been known to be placed in any race whatever. Keswick himself took the joke in good part, and laughed good-humouredly over his defeats—as, indeed,

he was always ready to laugh upon the smallest provocation.

The best of jokes, however, is apt to lose something of its flavour by constant repetition; and a man must be possessed of an immense fund of animal spirits who can see cause for merriment in the annual loss of many thousands of pounds. By the time that Lord Keswick had been a little over four years upon the turf, he had made away with the whole of the fortune bequeathed to him, was in debt to a considerable amount, and was solemnly assured by his father that his position was no laughing matter.

Lord Grassmere, who, if he had examined his past conduct, would have seen that he was himself the person chiefly responsible for these calamities, took this opportunity of informing his heir that, though his estates were large and his manner of living magnificent, he had very little command of ready money. He had younger sons to provide for, he said, and a wife and daughters to clothe; and, in short, Charlie would please understand that, for the future, he

must contrive to keep within the very handsome allowance accorded to him.

The young man really behaved very well. He sold his stud, and put down his drag. As for keeping out of debt, you might as well have asked him to solve the *pons asinorum*. In laying down a rule of conduct it is as well to understand how far your subordinate is capable of obeying you, and to remember that what is practicable to one man is impossible to another. Many people will tell you that a carriage of some kind is a mere necessary of existence; others, to descend a little lower in the scale of wealth, are honestly convinced that they could not dispense with a man-servant; and, in a similar way, Lord Keswick never even thought of depriving himself of certain luxuries, which to less exalted mortals might appear distinctly superfluous. Thus it came about that, at the end of another twelvemonth, he was again compelled to approach his father with a request for further advances. Lord Grassmere paid, and growled. But a few months later the same thing occurred again. This time there was what

Lord Keswick called a regular shindy. A family conclave was summoned 'at which it was unanimously agreed that this kind of thing could not go on; that there must be an end of it; that there was only one way out of it; and that Keswick must marry some girl with heaps of money forthwith.

The poor little viscount received this decision with manifestations of the most comical dismay. Anything but that, he said, he could stand. Let them send him out to Australia; let them pay him a lump sum down, and get rid of him; but for the Lord's sake, don't ask him to marry!

Lord Grassmere, the recipient of this pathetic appeal, said he couldn't for the life of him see what there was to make such a fuss about. Marriage might be a nuisance in some ways—far be it from him to say that it was not; but it was what everybody in a certain position in life had to go through, sooner or later; and, after all, the pill would be a gilded one.

'But I'm not a domestic man, you see,' said Lord Keswick, plaintively.

'Am I a domestic man?' retorted his father, in a tone almost of indignation. And, to tell the truth, he certainly was not.

'The fact is, Charlie,' continued this affectionate parent,' it is pretty much a case of sink or swim with you. I can't go on paying your debts at this rate; and if you don't marry a rich woman, hang me if I know what's to become of you! Your mother will find you some cotton-spinner's daughter who will set you on your legs again—and you needn't see much of her: you go your way, and she goes hers, you know.'

'Yes, and some fine morning I shall find she has bolted with some other fellow. That wouldn't suit me at all, thank you,' said Lord Keswick.

'*My* wife hasn't bolted,' replied Lord Grassmere, with dignity. 'Of course, we aren't going to ask you to marry a woman who would do anything scandalous. Hang it all! Charlie, I've been devilish liberal with you, and never interfered with you in any way, and now I think you owe it to me to do what I ask you,

and save me from expenses which, upon my word and honour, I can't afford.'

Lord Keswick gave way in the end. He was too easy-going to fight long against anybody or anything. But regarding matrimony, as he did, with a sort of holy horror, he did not think himself bound to further his parents' designs by showing any special attention to the various heiresses submitted to him for approval; and the consequence was that the majority of these prizes were carried off by others. Once, indeed, he was very nearly being done for. Miss Guldenthaler, the daughter of the eminent financier, who was understood to be anxious to ally herself with a scion of the British aristocracy, was strongly taken up by Lady Grassmere during a whole season, and Lord Keswick was so vehemently urged to offer his hand to this lady, that he could hardly see his way to disobey the behests of his relatives. One evening, late in July, Lady Grassmere, returning from her drive in the park, was astonished to find her drawing-room cleared of all its furniture, which had been heaped pell-mell against the walls,

while her eldest son was performing a fantastic break-down in the middle of the room, to the great delight of the Ladies Edith and Maude Fitz-Rupert, one of whom was playing a lively accompaniment upon the piano to her brother's performance. Lady Grassmere surveyed the scene with languid disgust.

'Really, Charlie,' said she, 'I think you might keep these exhibitions for the low companions of whom you are so fond. What pleasure can you possibly find in dancing in that ridiculous way, on a hot summer afternoon?'

'I dance because I am happy,' says the young lord. 'I have done my duty, mother; I have proposed to Miss Guldenthaler.'

'I don't see any cause for such exuberant joy in that,' returned Lady Grassmere, coldly. 'Of course you knew she would accept you.'

'That's just what she hasn't done,' cried her son, with a delighted grin. 'Miss Guldenthaler is a trump, mother: she has refused me!' And he recommenced his dance with fresh vigour.

What could a fond mother do with so impracticable a son as this? 'He is turning my hair grey with his folly and obstinacy,' she sighed, later in the evening. To which her husband sardonically replied that that would not matter much, since nobody would ever know now what its real colour was.

But to a lady of firm will and well-defined principles, obstacles and difficulties exist only to be triumphed over. Lady Grassmere soon recovered from her disappointment with regard to Miss Guldenthaler, and set about searching for a substitute for her with that energy which is ever inspired by the consciousness of a noble aim. Her delight on learning of the advent of a marriageable young lady, uniting in her own person the advantages of great wealth, beauty and (on the mother's side at least) good birth, may be easily imagined, as may also be the facility with which all necessary information was extracted from the unsuspecting Lady Sturdham. Lady Grassmere was not one to lose time about grasping any good thing that fortune might place within her reach, nor was

she unaware of the advisability of being first in the field where any great prize is to be won. We have seen how promptly she hastened to pay a visit of inspection to Lancaster Gate, and with what engaging candour she exposed her hopes and wishes to Mr. Howard.

Matters having been thus satisfactorily initiated, the next step was to bring about a meeting between the two persons principally concerned. With this end in view, Lady Grassmere, as soon as Mr. and Miss Howard had left their cards in Belgrave Square, sent a friendly note to the latter, inviting her and her father to dine, 'quite *en famille*,' at an early date. At the same time Lord Keswick was given to understand that his presence would be required at the paternal board on the day named.

The Grassmere *ménage* had always been conducted upon a scale of lavish hospitality which the present head of the house would gladly have reduced, had he possessed the requisite strength of mind to set his face against old traditions. To fill your country-house with friends, at certain seasons of the year, was all

very well; it was the proper thing to do; everybody did it; the newspapers reported it; and your guests departed with a proper sense of having been more or less honoured or favoured by their invitation. But Lord Grassmere, looking at life from the standpoint to which comparatively straitened circumstances had, of late years, brought him, did feel it a little hard that he should be expected to provide a so-called quiet dinner, night after night during the London season, for relatives and intimate friends, varying in number from twelve to twenty. These good people were in the habit of dropping in without notice, having been casually invited by one or other member of the Fitz-Rupert family, and did not consider that they incurred any obligation by so doing; while, on the other hand, they would have held themselves seriously aggrieved had the dinner set before them been otherwise than first-rate, or the wines of an inferior quality to those supplied on the most festal occasions. To a man engaged upon the difficult task of reducing the expenses of a large establishment such unremunerative hospitality

as this may well have seemed burdensome. But with Lord Grassmere and his difficulties we are not here specially concerned. It is sufficient to say that, up to the time of which we are writing, he had not succeeded in curtailing the friendly gatherings in question, and that, whatever the sentiments of the entertainer may have been, they were thoroughly enjoyed by the entertained.

An excellent dinner, at which you meet the very people you want to meet, where there is no formality, and from which, if so minded, you can escape without returning to the drawing-room, is a blessing which everyone must appreciate, and for which, if it were not an ungrateful world, everyone would be thankful. Such were the daily feasts provided, as a matter of course, by Lady Grassmere at her residence in Belgrave Square; and to such a one were Miss Howard and her father bidden in the manner already recorded.

Linda, who had not expected to meet more than half-a-dozen people, was rather dismayed, on her entrance, to find herself in the presence

of a tolerably numerous assemblage. The room was a large one, and was in semi-obscurity; for no candles had been lighted, and the sun had set some time before; there was a confused Babel of voices; and a score or so of ladies and gentlemen were distinguishable, scattered in groups here and there.

From one of these groups Lady Grassmere now detached herself, and came forward, in her usual languid, deliberate way, to welcome the new arrivals. She was followed by a tall old gentleman, with an iron-grey moustache and whiskers, who shook hands without waiting for an introduction, and whom Linda rightly conjectured to be Lord Grassmere. He stood talking to her for several minutes, keeping his eyes so steadily fixed upon her the while that she was very glad when he introduced to her a fat man with a bald head, and moved away.

The stout gentleman was in no way formidable. He was a brother-in-law of Lady Grassmere's, and knew perfectly well who Linda was, and why she was there; but his interest in the heiress was not so profound as to lead him into

the discourtesy of staring her out of countenance; and, as he was a good-natured man, and thought very likely the girl might feel shy at being thus introduced into a crowd of inquisitive strangers, he did his best to set her at her ease by keeping up a steady flow of small-talk till the time came for him to take her down to dinner.

Lady Grassmere enjoyed a deserved celebrity for her informal dinners, of which form of entertainment she had made a special study, taking care of the ease and enjoyment of her guests in other matters besides the essential ones of meat and drink. Linda was a good deal struck with the aspect of the dining-room, nothing like it having hitherto come in her way. The table was oval in shape, and the master and mistress of the house sat, opposite to each other, halfway down it, instead of at the head and foot; no dessert was displayed, no silver, and, upon the present occasion, no china; glass and flowers were the only forms of decoration used; and the shaded light from above was thrown strongly upon the table, leaving the

faces of the guests in shadow. All of which arrangements were in advance of the fashion then prevalent, and were much admired for their novelty.

Linda was able to form a tolerably shrewd guess as to the person destined to occupy the empty chair on her right-hand. Some oracular allusions which had fallen from Mr. Howard in the course of the few preceding days had served to enlighten her, in some degree, with regard to Lady Grassmere's designs; and though, at this time, she was convinced of nothing more profoundly than of her determination to live and die single, yet she was not without a natural curiosity to see the young man whose coronet was considered to be an equivalent for her guineas. She was a little disappointed when the first two courses had been disposed of, and no Lord Keswick appeared. But just as she had given up all hope of him, the vacant chair was drawn back by an attendant footman, and the truant slipped quietly into it. Linda's stout friend glanced up, saying, 'Hullo, Charlie'—and then added, 'I don't think you know Miss

Howard. Miss Howard, let me introduce my nephew, Lord Keswick.'

Lord Keswick bowed and smiled, and called over his shoulder to somebody behind him, 'Bring me some clear soup, please.' He did not appear to think it incumbent upon him to make conversation to his neighbour.

While he was eating his soup, Linda stole a furtive glance or two at his smooth, close-cropped head, his clear, healthy complexion and fair moustache, and thought him a handsome, gentlemanly little fellow, and not at all like his father or his mother. Then he looked up, and she saw that he had bright blue eyes and a pleasant, honest smile.

'Have you seen the evening paper?' he asked.

Linda said, 'No.'

'Oh, well, I have just got back—that's what made me late. Vauban won.'

'Did he?' said Linda. 'Who is he? and what has he won?'

'Why, the Two Thousand, to be sure,' answered Lord Keswick, in a tone of some sur-

prise. 'Do you mean to say you didn't know it was run to-day?'

'I not only did not know that,' said Linda, smiling, 'but this is the first time I ever heard that there was such a thing as the Two Thousand. It is a race, I suppose. The only race I know of is the Derby; and I have no idea when that takes place.'

'What a funny thing!' murmured Lord Keswick, looking down at the table-cloth with a wondering smile, much as an ordinarily well-informed person might do on being casually told by the lady whom he had chanced to take down to dinner that she was aware that there was a Prime Minister in England, but was not quite sure of his name. 'Never heard of the Guineas! Never heard of—— But some people don't care about racing, I know,' he broke off, not wishing to seem too hard upon anybody's ignorance.

'I should like to see a race very much,' said Linda; 'but I have only been a few months in England, so I have hardly had a chance yet. Papa is very fond of anything of that kind.

I think he has scarcely missed a single race since he has been in this country.'

'Really? Is that your father on the other side of the table? Of course it is, though. I know everybody else in the room.'

'Yes. I think he said he had met you at some steeple-chases in which you were riding, I forget where.'

'Ah, I daresay—I don't remember. One meets such a lot of people in that way.'

'It must be very exciting to ride your own horse in a race,' said Linda, thinking it best to pursue the subject which seemed most interesting to her companion.

'I don't know that it makes much difference,' said Lord Keswick. 'You'd do all you knew to win, don't you know, whether the beast belonged to you or to another fellow. I don't ride my own horses now, for the very good reason that I haven't got any to ride. I had a fairish stable of my own once upon a time; but I've given it up.'

'What made you do that?' asked Linda, in the innocence of her heart.

'Broke,' replied Lord Keswick, laconically.

Not being quite sure of his meaning, Linda held her peace.

Lord Keswick, too, kept silence for a short space, and went on with his dinner.

'After all, it don't much matter,' he resumed presently. 'You remember the story about that fellow—I forget who he was—some big swell, a hundred years ago, when they used to play so uncommon high. He said the next best thing to winning was losing, and the next best thing to losing was looking on. There's a good deal in that, when you come to think of it. I suppose everybody would like to have a horse in the Derby; but if you can't have that, at all events you can go and see the race run, and have something on it, if you like. I always try to make the best of things so far as I can.'

'So do I,' said Linda; 'but it is not always easy. Some troubles are all bad; there is no best to be made out of them.'

Her eyes turned involuntarily, as she spoke, towards her father, who was entertaining a

sleepy-looking lady, in ruby velvet and Brussels lace, with bland volubility.

Lord Keswick noticed the look, and wondered what it meant, but he showed no consciousness of it in his reply.

'Such as having a tooth out,' he said; 'I admit you can't make the best of that—that is one of the things which one has to grin and bear. Do you see that man with the hook nose at the other end of the table? Well, he has got some awful thing in his inside, which must kill him in a year or two, and may snuff him out any day, I believe. You wouldn't think it to look at him, would you? He's always like that—always jolly, and ready for any fun that's going; and if he ever feels down in the mouth, he don't let anybody see it. That's what I call real pluck. I don't know how I should bear a thing of that kind; but small annoyances, such as being hard up, and that, I can manage to put a pretty good face upon."

'You don't think money so absolutely essential as most people do, then,' said Linda, interrogatively.

'Don't I though! Half the troubles in the world come from the want of money, and nearly all the pleasures from the possession of it.'

'Ah!' sighed Linda, 'so I used to think once.'

'When you were a girl, eh?' said Lord Keswick, rather amused. 'And since when have you altered your mind about the value of money?'

'Since I have had it,' replied Linda, simply. 'This time last year I was quite, quite poor—oh! ever so much poorer than anybody you ever knew, I suppose—and then I used to think how perfectly happy I should be if somebody would leave me two or three thousand a year, and what I would do with it, and what fun papa and I would have together. Now I have got a great deal more than that, and things are altogether different from what I expected—altogether different!'

There was a perceptible quaver in Linda's voice as she spoke these last words, which caused her good-natured little neighbour to

glance at her with pity not unmixed with alarm. She recovered herself immediately.

'I believe you are right, Lord Keswick,' she said, with a smile; 'there are certain things which one must grin and bear—or bear without grinning, and certainly without crying out. No one has a right to obtrude his personal grievances upon his fellow-creatures. That is your theory, isn't it?'

'Oh, I don't know that,' said the young man. 'My fellow-creatures often bore me most confoundedly; so why shouldn't I give them a turn, if I feel inclined? That isn't what I mean. All I think is that, on perfectly selfish grounds, it is more sensible to get what enjoyment you can out of life than to go about groaning.'

'You have a wisdom beyond your years, Lord Keswick,' said Linda, gravely. 'I quite agree with what you say; and I am going to try and enjoy life henceforth to the best of my ability. How should you advise me to set about it?'

Lord Keswick was at no loss to find a string

of amusements suited to a lady of large means. He suggested, in turn, dancing, the opera, Ascot, yachting, and riding in the Row (in those days polo, rinking, and lawn-tennis lay still concealed in the bosom of futurity)—and had so much to say upon each of these topics that he was not at the end of his list when Lady Grassmere rose slowly from her chair.

'That's a very nice little girl, Charlie,' remarked Lord Keswick's stout uncle, as soon as the ladies had left the room.

'Very,' answered Lord Keswick, shortly, filling his plate with strawberries. 'You have heard all about the Guineas, of course.'

'I saw the telegram in the club. Were you on Vauban?'

'Backed him for a place ever so long ago,' replied the young man. 'Wish I'd backed him to win, this morning, but I fancied he looked a bit over-trained.'

'Now, Charlie,' said the fat man, pouring himself out a glass of claret, 'you're one of the knowing ones: can't you put me on a good thing for the Derby?'

"Well, I'll tell you what,' said Lord Keswick, drawing his chair nearer to that of his interrogator, and speaking in a low, confidential voice, 'I can tell you of a real good place investment. From what I heard to-day, I can name a horse that's *bound* to be in the first three if nothing happens to him between this and then; and he's a horse you can get a very good price about, too.' And so forth, and so forth.

In this way Linda escaped further comment among the gentlemen.

Meanwhile she was receiving a great deal of flattering attention upstairs, in the drawing-room. All the ladies there assembled were in some way related to or connected with one another, and all were benevolently interested in poor 'Charlie's' welfare. It was well known to them that the family finances required recruiting, that this end must be achieved in some way or another, and if through the medium of a quiet, lady-like and well-dressed girl, why so much the better—and so much the greater reason for civility to a young person who had

the good taste to be a pleasing object to the eye as well as a necessary acompaniment to the required specie. One by one, each of these excellent dames took an opportunity of saying something kind to the little heiress; all promised to call upon her, and hoped to see her at their next ball. I do not say that they would have been rude to her, or even that they would have left her alone with a photograph book in a corner, if she had been poor and insignificant; but it is certain that, in the latter case, they would never have thought of calling upon her. They had nothing personally to gain by Miss Howard's marriage with their cousin, nor could their motives for showing her attention be properly called mercenary. In acting as they did, they simply obeyed the natural impulse which prevails among all classes and estates of mankind, bidding them bow down below wealth, which is one form of power, as genius, beauty and rank are others.

Linda, perfectly understanding this, was neither unduly elated nor foolishly indignant at the prominent position assigned to her. It was

nothing more than she had always been led to expect; and it was some comfort to her, in her present rather despondent state, to find that, if a large fortune is powerless to bestow happiness, it is at least able to throw open the gates of society.

It was not Lord Keswick's usual habit, when he dined at his father's house, to show himself in the drawing-room after dinner; and that he departed from his ordinary custom on this particular occasion was hailed by his watchful mother as an auspicious omen. Her joy was increased when she saw him immediately seek out Miss Howard, and, after a few minutes of conversation, retire with her to a distant part of the room, upon the evidently shallow pretext of showing her a portfolio of old engravings, in which both of them appeared to become speedily engrossed. Lord Grassmere's lined and anxious visage, too, relaxed at this pleasing sight, while Mr. Howard was radiant with sherry and complacency.

So here we have an honest and well-meaning

young man driven to simulate an affection which he does not feel, in the hope of securing a wife with an income sufficient to defray the cost of his amusements; a father, a mother, and a chorus of affectionate relations egging him on towards the accomplishment of his clumsy fraud; and another father, who, understanding the whole scheme, is yet ready and willing that his only daughter shall play her part in it, and sacrifice herself, her liberty, and her future, in order that she may, some day, have the right to style herself Countess of Grassmere. There is nothing especially novel in this spectacle; nor is it an unexampled phenomenon—though it must for ever remain a queer one—that none of these people should have imagined themselves to be aiding and abetting in the commission of a dishonourable action, or doubted for a moment but that their conduct was in harmony with a high moral standard. Yet, in the course of his duties as a magistrate, Lord Grassmere must have had many a poor rogue brought up before him, charged with ob-

taining money under false pretences ; and I dare-say that his lordship would not have allowed such a miscreant to slink away to the just punishment in store for him without some stern and appropriate comments upon the enormity of his offence.

CHAPTER XVI.

LINDA BECOMES KNOWN TO THE WORLD.

LINDA'S admission into fashionable society was now an accomplished fact. From the day of Lady Grassmere's dinner, visits and invitations poured in upon her with unfailing regularity; and when, a few weeks later, Lady Sturdham arrived in London, she found that she had been forestalled in her amiable intention of introducing her niece into exclusive circles.

This discovery occasioned Lady Sturdham some passing irritation; for she thought that Lady Grassmere's conduct in the matter had been slightly precipitate and unceremonious, and she had looked forward, not without secret pleasure, to the importance of having a well-dowered *débutante* on her hands to establish; but, as a set-off to this disappointment, there

was the relief of being freed from the troublesome duties and responsibilities of a chaperon; and, whatever might be thought of Lady Grassmere, in a private and personal capacity, the loftiness of her social position was beyond dispute. No girl could desire to enter the world under more unexceptionable protection; nor could any lady in England feel otherwise than honoured by an offer of marriage from Lord Keswick. Such was the deliberate opinion of Lady Sturdham, a virtuous, charitable, and, upon the whole, unworldly woman; and if it be an honour *per se* to be admitted into intimacy by persons of a higher rank than your own, without regard to the causes by which such admission may have been brought about, then, no doubt, her judgment was justified.

'Uncle Jim,' however, was less amenable to reason, and was inclined to be very wrathful when the projected alliance, and the prompt measures which had been taken with a view thereto were first disclosed to him.

'Upon my word, that woman is the coolest hand I ever met with!' he exclaimed. 'What!

—go and call upon a total stranger, without rhyme or reason, and say, "Oh, I hear you have got a large fortune; my son happens to be in want of an article of that kind; would you be so obliging as to let him have the refusal of it?" I never heard of such a thing in my life! What is the world coming to?'

'Oh, but James.' interposed Lady Sturdham, deprecatingly, 'she did not put it like that. In fact, I don't think Linda has been spoken to on the subject at all.'

'My dear Selina, however it was put, it was a very great piece of impertinence; and I shall take care to put Linda on her guard against the Grassmeres and any other fortune-hunters.'

'Of course, James, I should not think of encouraging a match which you disapproved of,' said Lady Sturdham, submissively; 'only I do think the poor child ought to be married, and taken away from that terrible old father of hers as soon as possible. It must be so very bad for her to live with him.'

'She has lived with him all her life, and it

doesn't seem to have done her any great harm as yet,' remarked Lord Sturdham.

'But I don't think he can always have been as bad as he is now. And then he has such dreadful friends! You remember that Mrs. Williams and her daughters at Brighton—and no doubt there are others. If Linda is left to him, I feel sure he will marry her to some horrid low man whom we should not be able to acknowledge. Lord Keswick is at least a gentleman, and I don't think you can call him exactly a fortune-hunter. I hope you will not set Linda against him before you have thought it all over a little. They tell me he is really a very nice young man, and that he has never got into any serious mischief.'

'He has never done any serious good that I know of,' growled Lord Sturdham. 'However, it is not Lord Keswick whom I object to, but the way in which his people have behaved—as though the girl's wishes and happiness were of no importance at all.'

'Girls so seldom know what is for their own happiness,' sighed Lady Sturdham. 'But if

she did wish it—you would not object then, James?'

'My objecting would not make much difference, I suppose; I have no authority over Linda. But I should hope that her own good sense would keep her from marrying a man who is so evidently in love with her money, and not with herself.'

'I think you are too hard upon him, James, I do indeed,' said Lady Sturdham, roused by opposition into championship of Lord Keswick, whom she had not seen half-a-dozen times in her life, and knew hardly anything about. 'It would be absurd to pretend that he is indifferent to money—nobody is that—but he may love Linda for her own sake as well; and, from all I have heard of him, I fancy he will make a good husband.'

Lord Sturdham had a good deal to say in reply; but the upshot of it all was that he came round, as usual, to his wife's way of thinking—in so far, at least, as that he was prevailed upon to adopt a neutral attitude, and promised that, if he would do nothing to further the scheme

under consideration, he would, at all events, abstain from thwarting it. So that Lady Sturdham, happening to meet Lady Grassmere at a dinner party the next evening, was able to announce that, 'James quite approves of our little plan, and hopes it may turn out successfully.' To which the other conspirator, with a languidly gracious bend of her head, replied that she was charmed to hear it.

'I am sure Miss Howard will be glad to have her uncle's approval if the match ever does come off,' she said, 'though I believe she is entirely her own mistress. Nothing is settled as yet, you know, dear Lady Sturdham; and perhaps, for the present, it would be as well not to talk about it, don't you think so?'

For Lady Grassmere was now tolerably confident of achieving her end, and felt herself in a position to dispense with extraneous aid.

Peace and contentment reigned in the breast of that fond mother, and reacting through her upon her weary and harassed lord, made the big house in Belgrave Square a pleasanter place to visit at than it had been for some years past.

For Lord Keswick had been pleased to declare himself entirely satisfied with the bride selected for him, and had committed himself to a distinct promise that he would enter into a formal engagement with her before the expiration of the season. The possibility of his offer being declined had scarcely entered into his calculations —not because he was in any degree a coxcomb, but so prosaic an affair as marriage had always been represented to him as an arrangement concluded between two worldly-wise persons for their common advantage; and, so far as he had given the subject a thought, he honestly believed that his title and prospects were a fair set-off against Miss Howard's wealth. That heiresses were occasionally perverse, and chose to throw away their chance of using a coronet on their note-paper and on the panels of their carriages, his own experience had taught him; but these, he imagined, were very exceptional persons; and, indeed, there seemed to be no ground for anticipating any such disappointment in the present case. Seeing that Miss Howard was constantly with his mother, that she had

made friends with his sisters, and seemed kindly disposed towards himself, he very naturally concluded that she understood and approved of the destiny marked out for her; and, secure in this conviction, he awaited, with tranquil resignation, the final sealing of his doom.

Lady Grassmere, while sharing her son's confidence as to ultimate results, would yet fain have made assurance doubly sure by getting the preliminary form of proposal and acceptance over without further delay; but here Lord Keswick proved recalcitrant. A few more weeks of liberty, he said, he must and would have; and the countess did not care to overdrive a willing horse. A gold-digger who has once got firm hold of a nugget may take his own time about converting his treasure into coin of the realm; and Lady Grassmere was of opinion that her nugget was now secure. When her husband, who was growing a trifle testy and querulous under the pressure of increasing years, worries and embarrassments, asked her, one day, why the dickens she didn't get the thing settled and done with, she replied, with a calm

trustfulness in the integrity of human nature which could hardly have been expected from a lady of her experience, that no girl could accept the kindness which Miss Howard had accepted from her, and then leave her benefactress in the lurch.

'It is a generally understood thing,' said her ladyship, 'that the marriage is to take place; and though of course there has been no formal announcement, I look upon the thing as virtually settled.'

It must be admitted that Linda had innocently given some foundation for the impression which Lady Grassmere had truly stated to be prevalent amongst her acquaintances. She had no intention whatever of marrying Lord Keswick, and therefore she would doubtless have acted more wisely had she shown herself less often in public under his mother's wing. She sat beside Lady Grassmere in ball-rooms; she was constantly seen with her in the park; she accompanied her to concerts and botanical fêtes and such other public resorts as were frequented by ladies in the days when Prince's and Hur-

lingham were not; and wherever she went Lord Keswick, who had not hitherto favoured society with a large share of his patronage, was to be seen at her elbow. The little world in which Linda's lot was at this time cast drew its own inferences, and remarked, in its good-natured way, that the heiress was making the running uncommonly strong; and thus did Linda secure for herself not only the outlook of eternal hatred on the part of the whole Grassmere clan —which must needs follow upon her rejection of Lord Keswick's suit—but likewise the laughing commiseration of outsiders at the failure of her supposed design.

Of all this, however, she suspected nothing. Her life, at this time, was not particularly happy; but it was busy, full of excitement, novelty and fatigue, and, by virtue of these attributes, in a great measure exempt from anxious thought. That Lord Keswick would sooner or later ask her to be his wife Linda could not but be aware; but she had not troubled herself with speculations as to the probable effect of her refusal upon him or his relatives, well

knowing that, in the eyes of them all, she was but a necessary, and perhaps troublesome, appendage to her fortune. She had become quite accustomed to declining matrimonial offers now, and had ceased to believe in the phenomenon of a broken heart.

If, indeed, Linda had had time and inclination for worrying herself, troubles less remote than these were not wanting to her. The young heiress found herself confronted every day with a crop of small annoyances—vexations too numerous and too trivial to be recorded here, and which, if set down, would seem absurdly slight; but which were not the easier to bear by reason of their pettiness. Pitiful quarrels between Mr. Howard and the servants; references to her, as mistress of the house, by one or other of the disputants, making her feel keenly the falseness of her position; unpleasant interviews with Mr. Deane, who, in his anxiety to protect his young charge from imposition, was sometimes disposed to usurp rather more of the functions of a guardian than he was entitled to; irrepressible repetitions of gossip

from the servants' hall, retailed by her maid or the housekeeper—such were some of the small burdens which were heaped daily upon Linda's shoulders, and which at first made her thoroughly miserable. But, as time went on, she learnt to put up with the tiny concomitant stings of riches, as she had formerly learnt to support those of poverty—only the responsibility laid upon her in the new station of life seemed heavier than it had been in the old. She had an impression that she ought to be doing some good with her money ; but she knew not how to set about this ; nor had she anyone to advise her in the matter. Lady Sturdham, to whom she mentioned her wish, responded by eagerly producing a list of various charities, by means of which it appeared that all sorts of odd, out-of-the-way classes of humanity were taken in hand, and saved from destitution ; and to these Linda had, for the time, to content herself by subscribing, though so easy and simple a method of benevolence hardly satisfied her aspirations. In some quieter future time, she thought, she would give the subject more consideration, and

try to discover some way of making herself useful in the world. For the present it seemed best to drift on with the stream of fashionable life; to hear, see and enjoy as much, and to think as little, as possible, since all reflection appeared to be more or less fraught with bitterness.

So Linda, under the competent guidance of Lady Grassmere, entered the very best of London society; was presented at Court; was subsequently duly impressed by the refinements of modern civilization as exhibited by the guests at one of Her Majesty's state balls; was introduced to statesmen and great noblemen and ambassadors and financiers; saw many famous men and one or two well-dressed women; received numerous proposals, and acquired some startling experiences of the baser side of human nature. A wholesome fear of being accused of exaggeration restrains the chronicler of Linda's career from entering into particulars as to the number, rank and age of those who, at this time, entreated her to share their lot, and as to the duration of acquaintanceship which they

considered necessary before making their flattering propositions. But if perchance he have the honour to number among his readers a *bonâ fide* eighteen-thousand-a-year heiress, he would respectfully ask that lady whether exaggeration in such a matter be in truth a possibility.

It will, at all events, be readily believed that Miss Howard had no lack of suitors during her first season; and doubtless she would have had even more if it had not been so palpably evident that she was destined to espouse Lord Keswick. The young man did his courting to the best of his ability, riding with Linda and his sisters in the Row, dancing with the former two or three times in the course of an evening, and sending her bouquets whenever his servant, to whom he had entrusted this part of the business, did not forget the commission. Further than this a certain obstinate honesty of character forbade him to go; and Linda liked him the better because, after the first evening, he never assumed the semblance of a lover-like manner in addressing her.

One of the many unwilling extravagances

into which poor Lord Grassmere was annually coerced by the mere force of immemorial custom was the hiring of a house at Sunninghill for the Ascot race-week, and the filling of the same with his friends and those of his wife and sons. It was an expensive business, not to be compensated for by any haphazard betting upon the course, and indeed more often worsened than improved by such endeavours; but to abandon it required an effort of will greater than his lordship felt equal to; so, in this, as in many other matters, he went on in the old way, looking principally, in these latter times, to Miss Howard, as to the life-buoy thrown him by Providence as a means of escape from the rising waves of embarrassment with which he feebly battled.

It need hardly be said that the young lady upon whose caprice such momentous issues depended was among the guests invited to partake of Lord Grassmere's hospitality on the occasion of the Ascot meeting to which the course of this history has now brought us. Nor could Mr. Howard be with propriety excluded

from the list, though Lord Grassmere had already developed a very strong antipathy towards that urbane gentleman—a feeling which, it may be mentioned to his credit, was neither perceived nor reciprocated. 'Grassmere and I always get on well together,' Mr. Howard would remark to any of his club acquaintances who cared to listen to such gratifying intelligence. 'Other people find him dull and silent; but the truth is there isn't a better fellow going, if you take him the right way. His liver is all wrong—that's what's the matter with him—and he wants cheering up and rousing. Very often I go and look him up, and find him as dull as ditch-water, and I can assure you, before I have been with him five minutes, he is walking up and down the room roaring with laughter.'

So Mr. Howard went down to Ascot, and enjoyed himself as a man must needs do who believes that he is conferring a benefit upon his fellow-creatures while in pursuit of his own amusement. Linda, too, was glad to escape for a time from the heat and noise and smoke

of London. For everything there is a season; and in all countries except our own, the season for dancing and feasting and the wearing of gay and uncomfortable apparel is the winter. The English usage, which finds its justification in the fact that, all things considered, it would be more inconvenient for the moneyed classes to be in London during the cold than during the warm months, may well appear to a stranger to be a perverse waste of the small amount of fine weather with which we are favoured in these islands. Linda, who had heard the nightingales sing, in the Cascine, on starry May nights, and had sat in the cool, shady glades which surround the Villa Borghese, while the sleepy hum of the city beyond came faintly through the warm air, found Kensington Gardens, with its nursemaids and perambulators and smoke-grimed trees, a poor substitute for those pleasant foreign retreats, and longed for a glimpse of the green English landscape of which she had heard so much, but with which she had not as yet been permitted to make any personal acquaintance.

Moreover, she had a great curiosity to see a race; and she was assured on all hands that she could not make a better beginning than by going to Ascot. Certain persons whom circumstances prevent from reaching the course by other means than those afforded them by nature and the South-Western Railway Company—who too often fail to meet with the luncheon they have a right to expect at the hands of their friends, and are fain to fight for a stale sandwich and a nauseous, tepid drink in the Grand Stand—who, after a breathless run along a dusty road, are hustled into a third-class carriage and politely told that they are lucky to get a place in the train at all—such persons, I say, may, as time goes on, have formed their own opinion as to the amount of enjoyment derivable from a visit to the Royal race-course on the Cup-day; but with that class of society we are not concerned. Our heroine has soared to a height where such discomforts as these are unknown; she will be driven to the course every morning on the box-seat of Lord Keswick's drag, or in an open carriage, as her fancy may

dictate; upon her arrival she can take her choice between remaining on the top of the drag and crossing the course to Lady Grassmere's box; she will have as luxurious a repast set before her as if she were at a party in London; she will see every race, from start to finish, without any trouble, and she will return in the evening without having had a moment of annoyance from heat, dust or crowd. Truly there are times when wealth has its conspicuous advantages.

Life at Lord Grassmere's temporary residence at Sunninghill had, among other charms, that of a perfect and unfettered independence. Neither host nor hostess made any attempt whatsoever at entertaining their guests; they were far too exalted personages for that. They simply intimated to such members of their household as it concerned that a certain number of people would be in the house during the Ascot week, and there was an end of the matter. Breakfast was to be had at any hour in the morning at which it might be required; carriages were provided for those who might

wish to proceed to the races afterwards; but no one was obliged or expected to appear at any given moment or place, nor was he in the least likely to be missed if he chose to absent himself. In the afternoon there were croquet and Aunt Sally in the garden; dinner took place at eight or half-past, and the day concluded with billiards and cards, or tea and gossip, according to the taste and sex of the visitor.

Linda at the races was like a child at a pantomime, and her delight at the scene would have been a treat to Lord Sturdham if he could have witnessed it. Not that the sport interested her greatly. She understood very little about that, and cared less. The horses seemed to her to move much more slowly than she had expected; each of them looked very like the other, except for a shade of difference in colour; she could never make out which had won the race, nor whether he had won easily or not; nor was she any the wiser when the name of the winner was announced. But she never wearied of studying the vast and varied human

concourse which, actuated by divers motives, is drawn together, every month of June, upon the Berkshire heath. The scarlet liveries and clumsy state-carriages of the Royal procession; the Master of the Buckhounds in all his glory; the crowds of fashionable ladies and ladies who wished to be thought fashionable; the long line of coaches and landaus and waggonnettes, and every other description of vehicle, drawn up on the opposite side of the course; the vociferous betting men, in their eccentric costumes; the British public, in its hideous holiday garb; Mr. Howard, in a grey frock coat and a white hat, darting busily in and out among the book-makers; Lord Grassmere standing, as usual, apart, and nibbling the top of his pencil-case in frowning silence; Mrs. Williams and her daughters, hot and good-humoured, waving their plump hands in undisguised glee at recognising their young friend in such high company—all this Linda looked out upon from her cool corner in Lady Grassmere's box, and found fully as diverting as any play.

She was free to gaze her fill without any

fear of interruption; for Lady Grassmere was by nature an intensely indolent woman, and did not care about making conversation for the benefit of little girls, unless there were some distinct advantage to be gained by doing so. 'One need not be upon terms of ceremony with one's daughter-in-law,' thought her ladyship when, during an interval in a flirtation with one of her middle-aged admirers, she noticed Linda sitting silent and alone. 'It is Charlie's business to amuse her now; I have done my part.'

Lord Keswick was conscientiously doing his part also; and not doing it badly. The scene being a race-course, it was not to be expected that he should spend the day at Miss Howard's elbow, to the detriment of his own affairs, which required constant personal supervision; but, whenever he found time, he ran up to his mother's box, and stationed himself behind Linda's chair. The task was not altogether a distasteful one to him. He had now quite made up his mind that, since marry he must, he would far rather marry Linda Howard than

anybody else; and though he was not in the least in love with her, he was not insensible to her beauty, nor unaware that, as his wife, she would do him infinitely more credit than Miss Guldenthaler could ever have done. Her profound ignorance of all matters connected with racing, which in a man would have appeared to him nothing less than despicable, rendered her, if anything, rather more attractive in his eyes. Imagine an artist opening the mind of the lady of his choice to appreciate the genius of Cimabue, Giotto, and Perugino, or a musician explaining to his intended bride the latent beauties of Herr Wagner's most bewildering passages. With little less enthusiasm did Lord Keswick expound to Linda the noble pedigree of Bonbon by Shooting Star from Toffee by Greased Lightning, and demonstrate in the clearest manner that he, and he alone, could win the Gold Cup.

'The favourite *isn't in it*, Miss Howard,' said he, earnestly. 'Don't you believe what people say, but take my word for it, and back Bonbon for all you're worth.'

'Have you backed him for all you are worth?' Linda asked.

'That wouldn't be very much,' replied Lord Keswick, composedly. 'No, I haven't—not yet. I've taken seven ponies to one about him; but I shall put on a little more presently, I daresay, as soon as I have seen a man who ought to be able to tell me whether it's a certainty. By-the-bye, you haven't been in the Paddock yet, have you? Come along and see them before they start, and I'll get my tip at the same time.'

Linda, not being quite sure what the Paddock was, or whether it was a proper place for ladies to visit, asked permission of Lady Grassmere, who answered—

'Oh, yes, go by all means, if you don't mind being grilled.'

So she went. Lord Keswick piloted her past the hubbub of the Ring and up the course, which was now thronged with loungers, till they reached a small gate in a park-paling guarded by a couple of policemen. Passing through this, Linda found herself in a crowd

scarcely less dense than that which she had just quitted. A few ladies were to be seen here and there; but tall hats were in a large majority; and under each hat was an eager pair of eyes anxiously fixed upon the string of horses which were being slowly led past for inspection previous to the great race of the week.

Lord Keswick recognised them all, and detailed their names and achievements to Linda as they approached. There was the winner of the last year's Leger; yonder was the three-year-old who had run such a good second for the Derby of the present year, and who, as some people thought, might add the Ascot Cup to the large collection of racing trophies which already graced his owner's sideboard. That white-faced chestnut was the famous Belisarius whom the prophets had pronounced to be invincible, and who had been made a hot favourite for the forthcoming contest.

'Here's one that can show him the way home, though,' said Lord Keswick, as a great black horse came sidling to the front and lashed out

once or twice with a freedom which caused a precipitate backward movement on the part of the bystanders. 'That's Bonbon; and as far as looks go I think you'll admit there ain't much fault to be found with him.'

'I shouldn't like to have to ride him,' was Linda's comment upon the appearance of this fiery steed.

'Oh, he's all right,' said Lord Keswick; 'he only wants a little humouring. If they can only get a good start, you'll see——'

He broke off to catch by the elbow a little smooth-shaven, oldish man, in very tight clothes, who was hurrying by.

'Well, Wright,' said he, 'are you going to pull it off?'

'We ought to it, my lord,' answered the man, pushing his hat off his forehead, and glancing to right and left with sharp, beady eyes. 'I don't see nothink here to beat us.'

'Then you'd advise me to get on it, eh?'

'I don't advise nothing nor nobody, my lord—couldn't do it with a nervous horse, and such a course as this here; but I'll go so fur as

to say this—I believe we must win, *bar accidents*.'

'I don't quite know what to make of that,' soliloquised Lord Keswick, as his oracular adviser bustled away. 'Wright is such a deuced cautious old bird. That was Wright,' he added, explanatorily, to Linda—'the father of the man who is to ride Bonbon. He was a famous jockey himself, in his day, and he's pretty wide awake. I almost think I'll risk it. No, I won't either—I'll leave it to you. You tell me whether to go a big thing on Bonbon or not, and I'll abide by what you say.'

'How can I possibly tell you?' said Linda, laughing. 'I know nothing whatever about it.'

'Of course not. It's only for luck, don't you see?—like tossing up. Now, then; yes or no—which is it to be?'

'Well—yes!' said Linda; and then immediately repented of her decision. 'No—I think, after all, I would rather say No,' she concluded.

'It won't do,' said Lord Keswick; 'second thoughts are always wrong. Besides, I am quite sure your instinct made you say yes

against your will—which shows I am in for a little bit of luck. Now, if you don't mind, we'll be off. I shall only just have time to get this thing on.'

The course was already being cleared when they emerged; and they were hastening back over the dusty brown grass, when Linda was startled by a smart tap on her shoulder from the handle of a parasol, and turning round found herself face to face with Ada Tower.

Miss Tower, always a striking figure, had surpassed herself in brilliancy this sunny June day. A costume, fresh from the hands of the great M. Worth, exhibited to perfection the symmetrical lines of her stately person; a bonnet, the price of which must have made a formidable breach in her quarter's allowance, crowned her rippling golden locks; a delicate and most artistic bloom showed itself upon her fair cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with merriment and joy and goodwill towards all mankind.

'My *dear* Linda,' cried she, with great warmth, 'how delighted I am to see you! I

have been so fearfully busy ever since we came to town, or I should have found you out before this. I have ever so many things to talk to you about. Mamma is on that drag over there; do come and be introduced to her, and stay till after the race, will you? You will see just as well from there as anywhere else.'

'I should like it very much, answered Linda. 'Lord Keswick, you are dying to get away, I know. Please go; and I will find my way back when the race is over.'

Lord Keswick did not wait for a second permission; but, hastily raising his hat, ran off in the direction of the Ring. Miss Tower looked after him with a knowing smile. 'Now that you have got rid of your cavalier, my dear,' she remarked, 'I will dismiss mine. Take yourself off, Mr. Plowden; you are not wanted any more for the present.'

The subject of this unceremonious command was a short, red-haired man, rather overdressed, and wearing a conspicuous bouquet in his buttonhole, whom Linda had not hitherto noticed. He took his *congé* in anything but a

meek spirit, becoming very red in the face, and blurting out, 'I hope, Miss Tower, I am not in the habit of stopping where I am not wanted.' After which he strutted away with such a comical display of indignation that Linda could not repress a smile, while Miss Tower laughed aloud in her usual hearty and unreserved manner.

'Did you ever see such a fool in your life?' said she.

'He seems to get angry very easily,' remarked Linda.

'Oh, yes; he is a mere savage—quite ignorant of all the manners and customs of society. But I am taming him by degrees,' said Miss Tower, complacently. 'This is his drag, by the way; and there is mamma on the box-seat. Mamma, I want to introduce you to Miss Howard.'

Mrs. Tower's venerable features became wreathed in smiles. Her bow expressed something more than friendliness, and she put out her hand as though she would have grasped that of her daughter's friend—only difference

of level rendered this an impossibility. Mrs. Tower was not much at home upon the box-seat of a coach; nor would she ever have placed herself in such a situation of her own free will; but, upon the present occasion, it had seemed to her her duty to incur present peril and discomfort in view of certain future equivalents. She was not a bad mother—according to her lights—and, to do her justice, she would have consented to ride a donkey round Hyde Park, with her face to the tail, if by that means she could have attained the end which she had contemplated in accepting Mr. Plowden's kind offer to drive her and her daughter from Windsor to Ascot.

'I am so very glad to meet you, Miss Howard,' she said, as soon as the latter had been helped up to the seat behind her. 'I have been wishing so much to thank you for all your kindness to Ada at Brighton.'

'It was Ada who was kind to come and keep me company,' answered Linda; and she thought to herself, 'I wonder whether she remembers that evening on the Brühlische Ter-

rasse, when she took Mr. Mainwairing away, and whispered at me so rudely!'

Mrs. Tower recollected the incident perfectly; but if Linda imagined that the remembrance was in any way disconcerting to that lady, she was very much mistaken. There may, perhaps, be some people in the world who, having treated a girl with contempt when she was poor and unknown, might feel a tinge of shame in welcoming her when fortune had made her rich and sought after; but, if such there be, it is certain that Mrs. Tower was not one of them. Circumstances alter cases, all the world over. An heiress and a pauper are two separate creatures, demanding a separate form of treatment; and if, by any chance, the one turn into the other, what can be more reasonable than that she should be looked upon as what she is, and not what she formerly was? It was as natural to Mrs. Tower to worship prosperity and turn away from adversity as to admire a butterfly and shudder at the sight of a nasty creeping caterpillar. Therefore she took almost as much trouble to entertain Linda as if the girl had been a duchess, and would have

been quite contented to go on talking to her for half an hour, if Miss Tower had not abruptly interrupted the interview by breaking in with—

'Now, Linda, I didn't bring you here to exchange polite speeches with mamma. Come to the back of the coach; I want to talk to you.'

Linda followed her imperious friend to a place out of range of Mrs. Tower's ears.

'Have you anything particular to talk about?' she asked.

'Yes; I want to know what you think of Mr. Plowden?'

'What I think of him?' repeated Linda, hesitatingly.

'Yes. But never mind. Of course you think he is ugly and common-looking; and so he is. Also he has thirty thousand a year, which he is ready to put at my disposal whenever I like. His father was an iron-master, and his grandfather was Heaven knows what—I'm sure Mr. Plowden doesn't. Now, what do you think of that?'

'Do you mean to marry him, then?' asked Linda, replying to the question by another.

'That is exactly what I have not made up my mind about. And you know why.'

'Because of—of Mr. Mainwairing, you mean.'

'Just so. Thirty thousand a year, and a husband as good as another in one scale, and George and starvation in the other—in which will you throw the weight of your influence?'

'I cannot choose for you,' answered Linda, coldly. 'I suppose you know best yourself what is likely to make you happy.' She could not help adding (for it struck her that Ada was more offensively flippant than usual): 'are you quite sure that the choice rests entirely with you?'

'You think George may not ask me,' replied Miss Tower, not at all offended. 'There is that possibility to be considered, certainly. And yet he answers my letters very regularly now, though he used to be a bad correspondent. He mentions you, by-the-bye, in his last.'

She produced a letter from the velvet bag which hung at her side, and handed it to Linda, who took it, after a moment of hesitation, and

read the last paragraph, which Miss Tower pointed out to her.

'How strange that you should have fallen in with the Howards at Brighton,' it said. 'I was sure you would like them if you ever got to know them well. Please remember me to Miss Howard when you see her. I suppose we shall soon hear of her marriage to some big swell or other.' Then followed a few messages to people with whom Linda was not acquainted; and the letter was signed, 'Yours very sincerely, G. M.'

Linda handed it back without a word. Her heart was full of wrath and bitterness. Why did he speak of her as if she were a mere chance acquaintance? Why did he imagine that she was going to be married immediately to 'some big swell'?—as though she were of a nature to be dazzled by big swells. And what business had he to discuss the probability of her marriage at all? 'I believe there is no such thing as real friendship in the world!' exclaimed this young misanthrope, *in petto*. 'Everyone is altogether selfish and heartless.'

'If I were you,' she said, addressing Miss

Tower in a somewhat tremulous voice, 'I would marry Mr. Plowden. At least he is rich—and that is something. Perhaps you may manage to get more happiness out of money than I have done.' Then she turned away, because she felt that her cheeks were burning, and that there was a gathering mist before her eyes.

'Yours very sincerely, G. M.' A gentleman must be upon very familiar terms with a lady before he can venture, in writing to her, to sign himself by his initials only. And 'Yours very sincerely,' too. Years back, when Linda had been a little girl at Florence, her father had engaged for her a daily governess, a prim, English maiden lady of the old school, who had instructed her in Lindley Murray and deportment. Polite letter-writing had been one of this lady's *spécialités*, and her formula for the proper conclusion of an epistle addressed to one of the opposite sex had remained distinctly impressed upon her pupil's memory. '"Yours truly,"' she used to say, 'is to be used in communicating with a comparative stranger.

"Yours very truly," or "Yours sincerely," is polite, sufficiently cordial, and, in almost all cases, the correct expression for a young lady. But "Yours very sincerely" is next door to "Yours affectionately," and should only be adopted in the case of relations or persons of advanced years—lest dangerous misconceptions should arise.'

While Linda, mindful of this absurd old rule, was repeating, half-unconsciously to herself, '"Yours very sincerely" is next door to "Yours affectionately,"' there came a sudden thundering of hoofs, a flash of bright-coloured jackets, a prolonged roar from the crowd beneath—and the Ascot Gold Cup was lost and won.

'That's fifty pound to me; and fifty pound is better than nothing,' observed somebody behind her, in a deliberate voice.

She turned, and saw Mr. Plowden, who was restoring his glasses to their case.

'Is it over? Has Bonbon won?' she asked, anxiously.

'Lor' bless your soul, no! The favourite won. Bonebone bolted clean off the course—didn't you see?'

'And I told Lord Keswick to bet upon him!' ejaculated Linda, letting her hands fall with a gesture of despair. 'How dreadfully unfortunate I am!'

But she was a little reassured when Lord Keswick made his appearance, looking as smiling and unconcerned as usual.

'Did you back him, after all?' she inquired eagerly.

'What, Bonbon? I should rather think I did—worse luck! So did the governor. I shouldn't advise you to go near him for the next hour or two, unless you want to get sworn at. But you ought just to have a look at him from a safe distance. My word! what a face he has got on him!' And Lord Keswick laughed in the most light-hearted and undutiful manner at the recollection.

'Has he lost a great deal of money?' asked Linda, in some trepidation.

'Oh, dear, no, not half as much as I have. But he always takes things dismally.'

'He is not like you, then,' remarked Linda. The young fellow's courage and good temper pleased her; and perhaps it may have been for this reason that she was more friendly with him for the rest of the day than she had ever been before. She drove home beside him; she walked with him in the garden after dinner; and when she bade him good-night she gave him a rose which she had worn in her dress all the evening.

Lady Grassmere saw this, and was content; Lord Grassmere saw it, and a long breath of relief escaped his heavily-laden breast; Mr. Howard saw it, and chuckled, and displayed such exuberant and offensive spirits in the smoking-room, at a later period in the evening, that his host subsequently confided to the wife of his bosom that he should never, to his dying day, be able to understand why he had not chucked the fellow out of window.

As for Lord Keswick, I am sorry to have to

record that that young gentleman, while preparing to go to bed, said to himself that things were going on a deuced sight too fast, by Jove; and that if he didn't pull in a bit he should be an engaged man before he knew where he was. Which would not suit his book at all.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. HOWARD TAKES A BOLD STEP.

'LINDA,' said Mr. Howard, looking up suddenly from his newspaper, one morning about a fortnight after the Ascot week, 'was Keswick here yesterday?'

'No, papa,' replied Linda from the other end of the long breakfast-table.

'Nor the day before?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Nor the day before that?'

'Let me see. No, I don't think he was. He must be out of town, I suppose.'

Mr. Howard grunted, and returned to his *Times*. He had seen Lord Keswick playing loo at the club the night before, and knew, therefore, that he was still in London. What was the meaning of this conduct? For some

time past the young man's attentions had been perceptibly falling off in assiduity. More than once, lately, he had excused himself from dining at Lancaster Gate, and his visits were far less frequent than they had been earlier in the season. Could he be meditating treason? It hardly seemed likely; and yet there is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. It was certainly time that Lord Keswick declared himself more plainly; but by what means he could be compelled or induced to do so was not very clear. What, under the circumstances, ought a wise and thoughtful father to do?

Mr. Howard debated this question for some time without arriving at any solution of it satisfactory to himself; but, after a further half-hour of reflection, over a cigar, in the privacy of his study, he decided at length upon taking a bold step. He took his hat, gloves, and stick, and leaving the house, made his way across the Park and down Grosvenor Street and Bond Street, and so to Lord Keswick's rooms in the Albany. He walked with a firm, steady step, as one who has a purpose before him; and as it

was not yet twelve o'clock when he reached his destination, he was rewarded for his promptitude by finding the object of his search at home.

Lord Keswick, in his shirt-sleeves and with a short black pipe in his mouth, was seated before an open bureau on which lay a heap of papers.

'Hullo, Mr. Howard!' cried he, cheerily, as his visitor entered. 'Sit down, and have a weed. Jolly hot morning, isn't it? What will you take to drink—brandy and soda?'

'Nothing, thank you; I have had my smoke already, and it is too early for brandy and soda,' answered Mr. Howard.

'Gin and seltzer, then? Or, I'll tell you what—I'll get my fellow to mix you a brandy cock-tail; he's a rare hand at it.'

'Nothing whatever, I thank you,' repeated Mr. Howard, closing his eyes and waving his hand. 'It is too early in the day—far too early, really, for anything of that kind.'

Mr. Howard had come down prepared to play the *rôle* of the heavy father, and for the

life of him he could not help acting up to the part. He never could assume a character by halves.

'No smoke and no drink!' ejaculated Lord Keswick. 'Well—as you like. I'll just get these papers straight, if you don't mind; it won't take me half a second. I'm arranging my bills, you see,' he continued, after a momentary pause. 'I always pay my tradespeople upon a system of my own.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Mr. Howard.

'Yes. I keep all my bills upon a file; and after every race-meeting or night at cards, or anything of that sort I take them out, and see who's first on the list. If I've had a good time of it, I pay the top fellow, and sometimes the next two or three; if I've lost my money, the man at the top loses too, and goes down to the bottom of the list. It isn't a bad plan, is it?'

'It would be a much better plan to pay them all off and have done with it,' observed Mr. Howard.

'Oh, but that's out of the question, of

course. What I mean to say is, it's a really impartial system. No man can say he hasn't had his chance. Of course there's a certain amount of luck about it, just as there is in everything else—some of them get their money a good deal oftener than others; but that can't be helped, Now, here, for instance' (holding up a long strip of blue paper), here's Wilkins, saddler—deuced unlucky chap, Wilkins, I must say! He hasn't been paid for—let's see—six years, and now here he is at the top again just after I've had a bad night at loo.'

'You had better leave him where he is till next time, I should think,' suggested Mr. Howard.

'Oh, dear, no, that would never do,' said Lord Keswick, seriously. 'Make a rule, and stick to it. If you once begin to allow exceptions, where are you to stop, you know? No, no, Wilkins; fair's fair. You've had your chance, and down you go!' And the strip of blue paper disappeared beneath a superincumbent mass of similar documents.

'Nothing,' said Mr. Howard, impressively,

'is more wearing and harassing than an accumulation of unpaid bills——'

'Not to me,' interrupted Lord Keswick, airily, re-filling his pipe. 'I never allow myself to be bothered with such things.'

Mr. Howard shook his head and smiled sadly. 'You are young,' he said, 'and you think to-morrow may be left to take care of itself. When I was your age I too thought as you do; but a time came when I had to face facts—stern facts; and then, when it was too late, I bitterly repented my heedlessness. You may drift on for a time with your eyes shut; but what will the end of it be? What, I ask you, will be the end of it?'

'Upon my word, I don't know,' said Lord Keswick, staring. And he might have added, what was upon the tip of his tongue, "And I don't know what business it is of yours either—' only he was too good-natured to be uncivil to anybody.

'Then,' said Mr. Howard, straightening himself in his chair, and emphasising his words by tapping the palm of his left hand with the fore-

finger of his right, 'I will tell you. It will end in the Bankruptcy Court! From what your father has let fall in the course of conversation with me, I have very little doubt that he would allow it to come to that, rather than pay your debts again.'

Lord Keswick's patience began to give way a little. 'I daresay you mean kindly, Mr. Howard—and that,' said he; 'but you must excuse my saying that I have a prejudice in favour of being allowed to go to the devil in my own way.'

'My dear boy,' said Mr. Howard, affectionately, 'why should you go the devil? Why should you not get rid of embarrassment and bills, once for all, by means of a good and suitable marriage? I believe that you might make such a marriage, if you chose. I believe—though, mind you, I am only giving you my own impression; I have no authority for saying this—that, if you asked her this very day, you might have for a wife a girl who is neither the poorest nor the plainest in London. I have been sorry not to see you at my house of late, Keswick.'

'Mr. Howard,' said Lord Keswick, who had grown somewhat red in the face during this speech,' 'did you come here to ask me my intentions?'

'And if I did, Lord Keswick?' replied Mr. Howard, with quiet dignity. 'If I did come here in order to discover whether you propose to defer any longer the offer of marriage which I—and I may add Lord and Lady Grassmere too—have been expecting you to make to my daughter for some time past? Can you not understand that, however repugnant such a course may be to my personal feelings, you may have driven me to adopt it? You cannot suppose that your attentions to my daughter have not attracted general notice. The matter has gone on long enough—too long, indeed; and I must tell you now that unless it is brought to a conclusion within the present week, I shall be compelled to forego the pleasure of seeing you at my house again for some time to come.'

'This is plain speaking anyhow,' observed Lord Keswick, with a rather forced laugh.

'I never lost a friend by plain speaking yet.

If I have seemed blunt, you must forgive me; it is my character to be so,' replied that outrageous old Howard. 'My daughter,' he continued, 'is dearer to me than anyone else in the world; and when her happiness may be at stake I should be wrong indeed to allow any false feeling of delicacy to prevent me from saying plainly what is in my mind.'

'Well, but,' said Lord Keswick, who did not seem much impressed by this fine display of paternal tenderness, 'what's the use of being in such a confounded hurry? I am ready to agree to anything; but I must have time—hang it all! a fellow must have time.'

A sensitive man might not have relished this tone as adopted with reference to his daughter; but Mr. Howard was not foolishly sensitive. He only shook his head gently, and said—

'Time, my dear Keswick, is, unfortunately, the very thing that I cannot give you. And why should you wish for time? I do not desire that your marriage should take place immediately; I only want to be assured that it

either is or is not going to take place at some time. In the event of my daughter accepting your offer—which, I beg you to observe, I do not by any means promise that she will—I shall be quite satisfied to know that the ceremony would be concluded—well, let us say before Christmas.'

'Oh, well,' said Lord Keswick, brightening considerably, 'I don't mind that. Only it really would have been very inconvenient to me to be married just at present.'

'I understand—I understand,' said Mr. Howard, benignly. 'Bachelors' arrangements—bachelors' establishments—I shan't inquire too closely into anything of that sort. Lord bless you, my dear boy, I have been young myself.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' replied Lord Keswick, surveying his future father-in-law with a face expressive of anything but respect. 'What I meant was that I have arranged to go down to Goodwood and Doncaster with some fellows, and I don't want to throw them over—that's all.'

'Quite so—quite so. May I understand,

then, that you will speak to Linda some day this week?'

'To-morrow, if you like. Let us get the thing over, and be done with it,' answered the young man, rather gloomily.

'To-morrow let it be. And now, as I have an appointment to keep, I will bid you good morning,' said Mr. Howard, rising. 'And I wish you every success.'

'Thanks. Sure you won't have anything to drink before you go? Good-bye, then,' said Lord Keswick, relieving his feelings by shaking his fist at his respected friend's back.

'So I am in for it now,' he soliloquised, as the door closed. 'Hang it all! I wish it was over. I never felt such a d——d scoundrel in my life. If I didn't want money so badly I'd throw the thing up—hanged if I wouldn't! It's one thing to talk about marrying a girl for her money, and another thing to do it. Anyhow, I won't have any humbug about it, like that old sweep. I shall put the case to her in plain black and white, and she can take me or leave me as she pleases.'

In the meantime Mr. Howard, a trifle elated by his small victory, and in nowise harassed with doubts as to the integrity of his purpose, made his way back to Lancaster Gate, where he had another interview to go through—an interview which he feared was likely to be less agreeable than that which he had just brought to a successful conclusion. He fortified himself with two glasses of sherry before he entered the drawing-room, where, as he knew, his daughter was sure to be found at this hour of the day.

The Mr. Howard who threw open the door and sauntered up to Linda's work-table, with his hands in his pockets, chewing a toothpick, was a very different person from the Mr. Howard whom Lord Keswick had received an hour before. There are circumstances in which a man does well to behave himself with gravity and sternness, and there are others in which a jaunty demeanour best becomes him. Mr. Howard now found it appropriate to assume the latter carriage.

Linda looked up from her work as he ap-

proached with mingled surprise and pleasure. 'Have you come home to luncheon, papa?' she asked. Indeed, it was very rarely that she had the honour of her father's society between the hours of breakfast and dinner.

'Why not, my dear? I have no doubt you will give me a much better lunch than I should get at the club,' said Mr. Howard, good humouredly.

'I will tell them to get something more,' said Linda, anxiously, moving towards the bell.

But Mr. Howard waved her back. 'My dear child,' said he, 'what is good enough for you is good enough for me. Don't think of troubling yourself to order anything extra.'

There was a short silence, during which Linda wondered how much papa wanted this time; for, alas! she had learnt of late that amiability from her father usually heralded a request for a loan of money. Then Mr. Howard, who had thrown himself into a low arm-chair, and was staring up at the ceiling, announced that he had a piece of news for his little girl.

'Come, I'll give you three shots, and bet you sixpence you don't guess what it is,' said he, with charming playfulness. Linda, without knowing why, began to feel frightened; but as she had never ventured to disobey her father in the smallest particular, she dutifully attempted a suggestion.

'You have won a heap of money at cards?' said she.

'Deuce a bit!' replied Mr. Howard. 'Try again.'

'Is it good or bad news?'

'That depends upon how you look at it. I should call it good.'

'We are going away from London?' hazarded Linda.

'Wrong again!' exclaimed Mr. Howard, clapping his hands. 'My dear, let me remind you that you have only got one more shot.'

'I don't know what to guess. Has somebody left us some more money?'

'No such luck!' said the facetious Mr. Howard. 'You owe me sixpence. Well, as you won't guess, I suppose I must enlighten

you. Don't laugh. I am going—ha, ha!—I am going to be married. What do you say to that?'

Linda could say nothing. She turned pale, and her work dropped from her hands. Then, with a despairing hope that her father might be playing her a trick, she exclaimed, 'It is a joke, papa, isn't it? Oh, please say it is a joke!'

'It is as serious as your face, my dear; and I can't say anything stronger than that,' answered Mr. Howard, still nervously jocose. 'Come, don't you want to hear the lady's name?'

Linda sat motionless and horrorstruck; so Mr. Howard, after waiting for some encouragement, and getting none, proceeded cheerfully—

'The lady is Mrs. Williams. I hope my choice meets with your approval.'

'Oh, papa—that dreadful woman!' was all that Linda could say.

'I am quite sure, Linda,' observed Mr. Howard, calmly, 'that when you use the expression "dreadful woman" you forget that

you are speaking of my future wife and your future stepmother.'

Linda did not notice the remonstrance nor reply to it. She sat silent and wobegone, and presently the tears which had been gathering in her eyes overflowed and rolled down her cheeks.

'Do you love her, papa?' she asked at length.

The question was almost too much for Mr. Howard's gravity.

'My dear child,' he answered, 'allow me to appeal to your common sense. Is it even remotely possible that any human creature should be in love with Mrs. Williams? You hasten to say No. Very well. I grant you that Mrs. Williams is fat and plain, and that the end of her nose is red at times—particularly after dinner. You must, however, have observed that precisely the same thing might be said with truth of an immense number of matrons of between fifty and sixty, who, for aught we know, may have been beauties in their youth. Now, if I had married Mrs.

Williams thirty years ago, or even if your dear mother had been alive now, it would not have been at all surprising, but, on the contrary, quite natural and proper, that my wife should be elderly, stout, and ugly. At my age a man does not fall in love. If he did he would be eminently ridiculous. No; what he wants is a home; and what a woman wants is a protector. Mrs. Williams and I have exchanged ideas upon the subject of our several necessities, and the result has been that we have agreed to set up house together. Now, that's what I call very rational.'

'You have a home here, papa,' said Linda through her tears. 'In the dear old days when we were poor and happy you used sometimes to say that I was a good housekeeper, and made you comfortable. Oh, how I wish Uncle Thomas had left his horrid money to some one else! We have had nothing but misery since we have been rich; and sometimes I think it is a judgment upon me because I used to grumble at being badly off. I know you don't like the way we live here, because you never come in to

luncheon, and not very often to dinner; but if you will only tell me what you would like, I will try to manage better—I will indeed. I will send away Tester if you wish it. Only don't marry that dreadful Mrs. Williams and leave me! You are all I have to love in the world, papa, and if she takes you away from me what shall I do?' And Linda buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed.

Mr. Howard was a little touched. In his way he was really fond of his daughter, and, in common with the rest of mankind, the sight of a woman in tears made him excessively uncomfortable. Naturally, therefore, he began to bully.

'Linda,' said he, in his sternest tones, 'will you *oblige* me by controlling yourself? If you were not so abominably selfish you would understand that, at my time of life, it is essential that I should look out for a home somewhere. So long as you remain single I ask nothing better than that we should continue to live together as we have done; but it stands to reason that that cannot last. Before very long

you will be married; and what is to become of me then? At present I have a shakedown under your roof, and a sufficient sum paid quarterly to my account to enable me to keep my head above water; but do you suppose any husband would consent to have an old father-in-law quartered upon him, or to pay away even the small portion of your income which I now receive? Not he, my dear! I know human nature pretty well by this time; and I can assure you positively, without knowing who he may be, that he wouldn't hear of it. And quite right too. Now, with Mrs. Williams I shall obtain a sufficient income to be independent of my daughter and my son-in-law, which will be by far the most agreeable arrangement for all parties.'

'Papa,' said Linda, earnestly, 'if you will give up Mrs. Williams, I will gladly promise never to marry anybody.'

'Fiddledeedee!' said Mr. Howard. 'Of course you will marry.'

'No,' said Linda, shaking her head decidedly; 'no, I shall not. Nobody wants to

marry me—at least nobody wants me for myself—and I don't want to marry anybody. I shall remain single.'

'Well, then, I shan't,' returned Mr. Howard, 'and there's an end of it. I have made up my mind and given my word, and nothing that you can say will alter my decision. But I confess I should like to see you established before I change my own condition. I need not say that you will always be welcome to share my house; but I fancy you would not much care about living with Mrs. Williams.'

'I couldn't do it, papa,' answered Linda, with conviction. 'I really couldn't bring myself to do it. It would go too much against the grain.'

'So I rather imagined,' observed Mr. Howard, coolly. 'The only thing is that if you don't live with us, I don't quite see what you are to do. You can't live all by yourself, you know.'

'I could engage a companion,' said Linda. She was stung by her father's indifference, and

forced herself to adopt a more matter-of-fact tone.

'A companion is not a chaperon,' said Mr. Howard. 'The truth is that you have no choice between taking up your abode with us—which I am sure you are most welcome to do—and marrying. Now, if I thought it at all likely that your marriage would take place before the year was out, I would certainly postpone my own. For I am not in any desperate hurry to lead my Williams to the altar,' he added, with a grin. 'Supposing, now, a good-looking young man of excellent family and fine prospects were to propose to you—you would not refuse him, eh?'

'You mean Lord Keswick,' answered Linda, drily.

'Perhaps I do,' said Mr. Howard, not at all disconcerted. 'Keswick is one of the best young fellows I know: it is a match that any girl might be proud to make.'

'Only he hasn't asked me, you see,' said Linda, in the same cold tone. 'If he ever does I daresay I shall take him.'

'He will ask you, my dear; I feel sure that he will,' said Mr. Howard, eagerly.

'Really? You think he would condescend to take my poor eighteen thousand a-year, and make me Viscountess Keswick, and, some day, Countess of Grassmere, in return, though neither of us cares a button for the other? What an honour for me!'

'Indeed, my dear, many people would think it so,' replied Mr. Howard, a little puzzled. 'They tell me the Grassmeres haven't married out of the peerage for generations.'

'That settles it, then,' said Linda. And at this juncture, Hudson coming in to announce luncheon, the colloquy came to an end, and Linda was enabled to drop the ironical tone, of which, to tell the truth, she was no great mistress. The presence of a butler and footman in the dining-room happily precluded the possibility of further conversation, save such as related to topics of general interest; and Mr. Howard, who did not see that he could improve his position by any renewed discussion, made his escape upon the earliest opportunity.

Linda returned to the drawing-room and cried a little over her work. The blow which had fallen upon her was an altogether unexpected one. Never, in her utmost anticipations of possible ill fortune, had she contemplated so great a calamity as a stepmother. And such a stepmother! Poor Mrs. Williams was not an actively disagreeable woman; but her dress, her speech, and her gait were a perpetual grief and burden to all persons of average refinement. And her daughters were, if anything, worse than herself. Linda thought of her future quasi-relationship to those terrible young women, and quailed in dismay.

But, as her mind became, by degrees, accustomed to the inevitable, she began to take herself to task for the ungracious manner in which she had received her father's intelligence. After all, there had been a great deal of truth in his plea. It was natural enough that he should look forward to his daughter's marriage, and ask himself where he should find a home when she was provided with a husband. 'I shall never marry,' thought Linda; 'but he

cannot know that.' And he had been very kind—poor papa!—and had borne her reproaches meekly enough. 'I daresay I am abominably selfish, as he said,' Linda thought, sadly; 'and ungrateful too. He has done so much for me, and I have done nothing for him. What right have I to complain if he thinks a little of himself now that he is getting old? And yet, if it were only a home that he wanted, I could promise him that—only he wouldn't believe me. Oh, dear me! Mr. Mainwairing was right: there is no happiness in being rich. How thankful I should be if some good fairy would make us poor and free again, and transport us back to dear old Blasewitz!'

Her self-communings were interrupted by the entrance of a visitor. Mrs. Williams was announced, and waddled across the room, rustling in her violet silk dress, and panting, as she always did after climbing a staircase. Linda rose, and was saluted with a damp kiss, which she hastened to rub off with her handkerchief while Mrs. Williams was settling herself in an arm-chair.

'I am so glad to find you alone, my dear,' said the poor lady, who looked very hot and embarrassed. 'I have just seen your pa, and he tells me he has been informing you of—of his wishes.'

'Yes, he has told me,' answered Linda, frigidly, looking Mrs. Williams full in the face with slightly elevated brows.

She had not intended to be uncivil; but the woman's scarlet cheeks and violet costume exasperated her, in spite of herself, and rendered cordiality impossible.

'You were rather surprised,' I dare say,' resumed Mrs. Williams. 'Dear me, how hot it is to-day! I dare say you were rather surprised.'

'A little,' answered Linda, quietly.

'Yes, to be sure! Quite natural that you should be. My dear, how do you manage to look so cool this weather? I declare I'm so warm I can hardly bear myself. And I've come out without my fan, too.'

'I dare say you will be cooler presently,' remarked Linda, giving her visitor a hand-

screen. She felt that charity commanded her to set this poor fat panting woman at her ease; but she could not bring herself to obey the behest.

'She has got into a ridiculous position of her own free-will,' thought Linda; 'let her get out of it as best she can. Why should I help her?'

'Nobody likes a stepmother, I know,' went on Mrs. Williams, humbly.

Linda said nothing.

'But what we thought was that in your case it would not so much matter, because——

'Because?'

'Well, because you are sure to be married yourself before long. Mr. Howard said he should like your wedding to come off before ours; and I am sure so should I. Not but what I should be very pleased to have you live with us, my dear; and I do want you to look upon me as your mamma——'

'Excuse me, Mrs. Williams,' interrupted Linda; 'but that is what you are not, and never can be. And, if it is the same to you, I

would rather change the subject. I can't feel quite contented at losing my father yet.'

She ought to have been propitiated by Mrs. Williams's humility; but, somehow or other, it only had the effect of irritating her.

Mrs. Williams emitted a huge sigh; after which there was silence for a little space. Then the unfortunate bride-elect felt impelled to take up the thread of her discourse again.

'I am sure I don't want to distress you, Linda,' she began, hesitatingly; 'but, if the thing is to be, we can't shut our eyes to it, can we?'

'Only we needn't talk about it.'

'But, my dear, Solomon says, "Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh." And he says, "It is not good for man to live alone," too.'

'Does he?'

'The Bible says so, at all events; and to my mind Jeremiah and Isaiah and the rest of them were just as good men as Solomon, though they may not have had all his gifts. And it is very true that a man is not meant to

live alone—much less a woman. Your poor pa often talks about what he shall do when you are married, and gets quite low over it. And, for my own part, I feel so lost at times without poor Mr. Williams that I don't hardly know where to turn nor what to do. Ladies do get so dreadfully imposed upon. You wouldn't believe the money I've lost through not having proper advice. And as for travelling on the Continent, I wouldn't do it without a gentleman—not after the rudeness and extortion I met with last time—no, not for anything you could offer me!'

'Papa knows all about money matters,' remarked Linda; 'and he has travelled a great deal. I dare say you will find him very useful abroad.'

Linda knew that she was behaving very badly; and the knowledge was a comfort to her, as I dare say it sometimes is to the best of us. It was more with cruel Destiny than with Mrs. Williams that she was angry; but Destiny is impervious to mortal attacks; and here was a fat woman who, as the instrument of fate,

perhaps deserved some hard words, and at whom it was a relief and a solace to be able to snap.

But Mrs. Williams, in general vast, warm, and smiling, like the South Pacific, was also, like that tranquil ocean, subject to sudden and violent tornadoes of wrath. Linda's last speech stirred up one of these, and, to the great astonishment of the culprit, the offended lady started up from her chair, brandished her hand-screen in a fury, and broke out with—

'How dare you speak so to me, miss? How dare you insult me so? What do I gain by marrying your father? Answer me that! Do you know that he comes to me a poor man, and that I shall make him a rich one? For not one penny of *your* money will I have! And you will please to make arrangements for finding a home for yourself, for into my house you do not come, nor will I come into yours. No! I will not have my girls spoilt by associating with you, you impertinent, airified, ill-tempered little——'

'*Really*, Mrs. Williams——' said Linda.

'Oh, don't smile at me in that superior way. I'm not afraid of you, my young lady, though you have an earl for your uncle and go about with lords and ladies. Your father thinks me good enough to enter his family, and I suppose he is as good a judge as you—though if I had known how I should be received in this house, Goodness knows whether I should have accepted him. And a stepfather is no pleasanter than a stepmother, let me tell you; and yet my dear girls haven't given me a cross word or look about it, bless them! And most unkind it is of you, Linda, I must say—most unkind and cr—cruel! Oh!—hoo!—hoo!'

Down flops Mrs. Williams upon the sofa in a storm of noisy sobs; out comes her patchouli-scented handkerchief to stem the flood of easily flowing tears that well over from her eyes, escape down her cheeks, and patter upon her poor violet silk lap. After the storm the rain, and presently the sunshine again. Mrs. Williams' wrath has already passed away and left her deeply, bitterly ashamed of her vulgarity. Poor fat, kind-hearted mortal, to whom it is

forbidden to be otherwise than ridiculous even at the most pathetic moments! It would require a harder heart than Linda's to bear malice against her as she apprehensively lifts up a flushed and tear-stained countenance, gasping out—

'Oh, my dear, what have I been a-saying? I'm that upset and worried that I'm not answerable for my words—I'm not indeed. Overlook it for this once, my dear, and I'll never break out so again.'

'It was all my fault, Mrs. Williams,' says Linda, feeling a good deal ashamed of herself. 'I was very disagreeable. I, also, am a little upset to-day. Let us forgive one another and make friends again.'

Whereupon Linda is kissed and wept over, and bears her burden with meekness, admitting to herself that her future stepmother is a good woman in her way. Nevertheless, she is more than ever convinced that the same house will never be able to hold her and the Williams family.

And now, behold! before the tears are well

dry on Mrs. Williams' cheeks, the door is flung open, and in walks Lord Keswick, looking rather graver than is his wont. At the sight of him Mrs. Williams hastily rises and takes her leave.

'I shall see you again to-morrow, my dear,' she remarks, encouragingly, as she rustles away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LORD KESWICK'S COURTSHIP.

Mrs. Williams thought she had given proof of some tact and *savoir faire* in taking her leave so precipitately upon Lord Keswick's entrance; but if she could have read the secret thoughts of the two people whom she had thus considerately left to themselves, she would have made the surprising discovery that each of them unfeignedly regretted her abrupt departure.

Both of them would gladly have had a few more minutes of breathing-time, for they both knew that a crisis in their lives was imminent. Lord Keswick had nerved himself for the declaration of a proposal of which he was more than half-ashamed; but he had not yet had time to decide upon the manner in which his offer might most fittingly be made; and Linda,

who had divined the young man's errand the first moment she had seen his grave face, desired nothing more ardently than that she might be enabled to stave off the inevitable moment at least for another twenty-four hours. The day before she would have received Lord Keswick's advances with perfect composure, and would have refused him so kindly and prettily that his feelings could scarcely have been hurt, whatever his disappointment might have been. Constant practice had taught her the art of saying 'No' without difficulty, and with infinitely more grace than she had displayed when honest Herr von Oberndorf had made his avowal to her a year ago. But the world was all changed since yesterday. Linda, to use an expression which, we may be sure, would never have occurred to so well brought up a young lady, was 'between the devil and the deep sea;' and, looking upon Lord Keswick in the light of whichever of the above alternatives may appear most appropriate to the reader, she had already begun, in a dull, indifferent way, to doubt whether it might not be best for her to give

him a favourable reply. As yet, however, she was undecided, and could not make up her mind either to dismiss or retain him.

In this wavering frame of mind she dashed hurriedly into conversation, thinking, 'Perhaps somebody else will come in presently, and I shall get rid of him.'

'We were at the Opera last night,' she began, seizing upon the first topic that suggested itself to her. 'Patti was singing divinely. Did you ever hear her in "Don Pasquale?" I think it is one of her best parts.'

'I daresay I have,' answered Lord Keswick, absently. 'I don't know much about music, though. You went with my mother, didn't you?'

'Yes. How fatiguing it must be to sing, night after night, in this stifling weather! And yet how beautifully she does it! And how fresh and young she looks!'

'Who? Patti? Ah, but look at the pay she gets.'

'Yes; but that wouldn't prevent her from

looking fagged if she were so. I suppose it is the excitement that keeps her up.'

Lord Keswick didn't know much about *prime donne*, but he should think the excitement wore off after the first year or two, and that the work must be no end of a bore when you knew all the airs, and had got sick of them, you know. Which seemed pretty well to exhaust the subject.

After this an apparently troublesome obstruction in his lordship's throat made it so evident that he had some serious statement to make that Linda hastened to say something else—no matter what—before he should have time to begin.

'We went on to Lady Crowder's after the Opera,' she resumed. 'Why were you not there? You did not lose much, though; it was very hot and very dull. Are you going to the Duchess of Cirencester's ball to-morrow? Of course you will be at your mother's on Thursday.'

'That,' said Lord Keswick, slowly, 'will depend principally upon you.'

'How flattering!' said Linda, with a little nervous laugh. 'I shall certainly be there, if that is any inducement to you.'

'I didn't mean that. I meant that my going to balls, for the rest of this season, will depend upon what answer you make to—something that I have got to say to you.'

There was no evading that. Linda leant back in her chair and hardened her heart.

Lord Keswick was a successful rider, but many people denied that he was a good one. He was reckless, they said, and a bad judge of pace—which was certainly true. A fence, in his eyes, was simply an obstacle to be surmounted, and he never thought of asking himself what his horse's powers were, but rode straight at it, and, by luck or by pluck, generally contrived to scramble over. With moral as well as material difficulties it was his habit to pursue the same simple plan. In the present instance he felt that he had an awkward task before him, and had no notion how to set about it; but he knew that, before he had done speaking, he should, by some means or other,

have left the obstacle behind him; and that, after all, was the essential thing. So he settled himself in his chair, fixed his eyes upon Linda's face, and began, in a steady, unmodulated voice:—

'I daresay you know, Miss Howard, what I am going to say. Of course you must have understood that I shouldn't have been coming here as often as I have, and sending you flowers and all that, unless I had meant to ask you, some day, to—to—in short, to honour me by becoming my wife. Now, I'm not much of a fellow for love and romance and that kind of thing. I don't believe in it, and I don't pretend to feel it. But I do like you better than anybody else I know, and I would much rather marry you than any girl I ever saw. Only what I wanted to say was that if you had been poor I shouldn't have asked you. I must marry a girl with money; my people insist upon it, and, in fact, I can't help it. I thought I ought to tell you that before you gave me your answer, because I can't bring myself to be such a humbug as your—as some fellows. Now, I've told

you the honest truth. If you take me I'll do all I can to make you happy; and I think we should be happy, because we get on so well together—always have. But that is for you to judge of.'

And Lord Keswick, having taken his fence like a man, drew a long breath of satisfaction.

Linda contemplated him silently for a time, with an amused smile on her lips. 'That is a very funny way of making a proposal, do you know?' she said at length.

'I did it very badly, I know; but I had to tell the whole truth,' said Lord Keswick, much more at his ease now that he had discharged his duty.

'And it is so difficult to tell the whole truth, isn't it? Sometimes it is morally impossible—and perhaps that is just as well.'

'But one feels the better for having told it,' said the young man, still glowing with conscious probity.

'Does one? But perhaps one does not always feel the better for having it told to one. There is that to be considered, you see, in ad-

vocating a system of unreserved openness of speech.'

'But I wasn't advocating any system that I know of,' said Lord Keswick, innocently.

'I thought you were. Didn't you say that people ought always to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—or something to that effect? Now, I don't believe society could hold together for a day without white lies.'

It began to strike Lord Keswick that the lady was wandering rather far from the immediate question in hand, and that this discussion as to the inherent value of truth was a mere pretext for evading more personal matters.

'Perhaps not,' he said. 'In the meantime may I remind you that I am waiting for my answer?'

'Your answer? I wonder what answer you expect?'

'I don't expect anything; I only hope,' said Lord Keswick, trying to look humble.

'You must be of a very sanguine disposition if you hope for a favourable answer after

such a cynical declaration. But perhaps, after all, it is a refusal you hope for.'

'You know it is not,' said Lord Keswick. 'And I don't think it is quite fair to laugh at me, Miss Howard. You would not have laughed if I had told lies and gone down on my knees and sworn that I loved you. I would not ask you to marry me under false pretences; but everybody knows that it is not always love matches that turn out best in the long run; and I thought perhaps you might agree with me that we could be very happy together without having what you might call a romantic attachment, don't you know.'

'Quite so. And now you want my answer.'

'If you please.'

'What can you expect me to say? Here is your case, according to your own showing. "I don't care a straw for you, nor you for me; but as you have a fortune, which I do care for a good deal, and as I have no objection to you individually, I shall be very well pleased if you will consent to marry me." Well, that is very candid and business-like, if it is not particularly

flattering. But, as it seems to be agreed that we are to put love altogether out of the question, I may naturally ask what is to be my return for the money which has tempted you to make your kind offer? You would make me a viscountess, it is true; but it so happens that I do not care about being a viscountess, or a countess either—or a marchioness, or even a duchess. I am not sufficiently English to worship titles; and since I have been in London I have seen more than one duchess who did not seem to me what I should call a lady. I don't want a title. I have found out that my money will take me into the best society you have; and, besides that, I am not at all sure that I have any great love for the best society. So you see you are proposing a bargain to me which would be all to your own advantage.'

'Oh, if you put it in that way——' said Lord Keswick, looking rather disgusted.

'In what way would you like me to put it? I thought we were to be perfectly truthful, and dismiss all pretence and hypocrisy, and so forth.'

Yes; bu——'

'But candour has its limits. I understand, and I quite agree with you. I told you just now, you know, that it is pleasanter to tell the truth than to hear it. If you had asked me to marry you in the ordinary way, perhaps I should have been able to give you an ordinary answer; but you would go in for being eccentric, and now that I answer you according to your eccentricity you think me very ill-mannered.'

'Oh, no,' protested Lord Keswick. 'Please don't suppose that I meant to imply that. But I don't want you to think that I was merely trying to make a bargain with you either.'

Yet his conscience told him that that was precisely the thing that he was endeavouring to do; and this made him uneasy; for he had generous instincts, and did not like the idea of overreaching anybody. He had always been given to understand that a viscount's coronet was worth a good deal of certain people's money; but if Miss Howard really didn't think so—why, then, of course, there was nothing

more to be said. Only he did wish she would express her views more distinctly; because at present he could not make out whether she meant to accept or to refuse him.

He would have been not a little surprised to hear that the lady herself was in a state of similar uncertainty; but so it was. Linda's mind was in a chaos of doubt, perplexity, and misery, amidst which two things only seemed clear and certain—that her father wished to get rid of her, and that she would never live under the same roof with Mrs. Williams. Being thus so rejected and forlorn, she could not, on the spur of the moment, bring herself either to welcome or send away this good-natured, selfish little mortal, who, with the light of truth shining in his clear blue eyes, had promised that 'he would do all he could to make her happy' as his wife. So, since she could not take the dilemma by the horns, she went on trying to evade them.

'Why should you not make a bargain?' she asked. 'Everybody seems to do it; and, so long as the bargain is a fair one, where is the

harm? Papa is going to marry Mrs. Williams because she is rich and can give him a comfortable home; and Mrs. Williams is going to marry papa because she wants somebody to help her with investments and look after her luggage when she is travelling; and you want to marry me because—unluckily for myself—a misguided old man chose to make me an heiress; and——'

'But I say,' interrupted Lord Keswick, whose eyes had opened in a manner expressive of extreme surprise, 'is that really a fact? About Mr. Howard, I mean.'

'Oh, yes,' said Linda, with a not very successful assumption of indifference. 'I forgot you had not heard of it. So you see,' she added, with a faint smile, 'I should gain something if I married you, after all; because I must live somewhere, and I don't think I could bear to live with a stepmother. Besides, they want to get rid of me—naturally.'

Her voice trembled a little as she spoke these last words, and she rose hastily and began pulling the dead leaves off some flowers

which stood in a stand beside one of the windows.

Lord Keswick thought he understood something of the struggle which was agitating the girl's mind. Some dimly chivalrous instinct suggested to him, also, that it would be ungenerous to press her further just then. He got up and drew closer to Linda, who was standing with her back towards him.

'Let us leave it open for a couple of days, Miss Howard,' he said, gently. 'I would give you a longer time, only I can't, because of a promise I made this morning. Think it over, and let me have my answer the day after to-morrow. And I hope you won't think worse of me than you can help. I can't pretend to be disinterested—you know that; but I swear I would never have asked you to marry me if I hadn't been—well—very fond of you, and if I hadn't really believed that we could be happy together. Now, I won't say another word, except to remind you that there are heaps of better fellows than I who would be only too glad to give you a home if you wanted one. I

mean, you mustn't let yourself be driven into accepting me by mere dread of your step-mother. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Lord Keswick,' said Linda, stretching out her hand, but keeping her face averted. 'You are very kind and good, and if I were to marry anybody I think it would be you. But it is difficult to decide all at once; and, as you don't mind, I shall be glad to have two days to think things over in.' Then she wheeled round suddenly and exclaimed, 'What matter-of-fact people we are! Wouldn't one think we were discussing a small matter of business, instead of the question of whether we are to pass the rest of our lives together or not? There will be no broken hearts, will there? whichever way I decide.'

She laughed; but Lord Keswick saw that her eyes were swimming in tears. They were very pretty eyes—brown, soft, and sad; and there was a look in them which somehow increased the uncomfortable feeling of self-contempt with which this conscientious young man had been afflicted ever since Mr. Howard's visit

to him in the morning. He went his way silently; and as he strolled, in the sunshine, across the brown grass of Hyde Park he marvelled more than once how it was that he had escaped falling in love with Miss Linda. Possibly he might have been guilty of that weakness, he thought, if she had not been so rich, and if he had not been ordered to marry her.

Linda, when she was alone again, threw herself upon a sofa, covered her face with her hands, and cried a little. But she was too feverish and excited to give way to her feelings for long. She rang the bell presently and ordered the carriage; and as soon as it was ready drove to Lord Sturdham's house in Bruton Street.

'Yes, Lady Sturdham was at home,' the butler said, in answer to her inquiry, but she was not very well. He would ask whether she was able to receive visitors.

'Oh, I am sure she will see me,' said Linda, getting out of the carriage, and passing through the hall-door without paying any regard to the

man's reproving observation of 'Her ladyship is very far from well, ma'am.'

She ran lightly upstairs and entered the darkened drawing-room.

'Linda, my dear, is it you?' asked Lady Sturdham's voice faintly from the other end of the room.

'Yes, Aunt Selina,' answered Linda. And as her eyes became accustomed to the half-light she discovered the invalid stretched upon a couch, with a novel in her hand and a bottle of smelling-salts at her side, and advanced towards her. 'I am very sorry to disturb you, aunt,' she continued; 'but I wanted particularly to see you for a few minutes. Are you feeling too ill to talk to me?'

'Oh, no, my dear,' answered Lady Sturdham, a little plaintively. 'I have one of my bad headaches, but it is of no consequence. You do not come to see me so often that I can afford to send you away when you do pay me a visit. Sit down here. I know you will excuse my getting up; every movement is a torture to

me. You have something particular to tell me, you say?'

'Yes, aunt,' replied Linda, briefly. 'Papa is going to be married to Mrs. Williams.'

Lady Sturdham raised her delicate white hands and let them fall again with a movement indicative rather of sorrowful protest than of surprise.

'My poor child!' she ejaculated. 'I foresaw this from the first. How very, very shocking! And at his age too! Ah, dear, dear me! But I foresaw it from the first; I always knew how it would end.'

Lady Sturdham's melancholy satisfaction at the remembrance of her prescience did not seem to be participated in by her niece.

'Of course papa is quite right to marry if he wishes it,' she said, rather sharply.

'Yes, yes; we cannot dispute his right to please himself; there is no law to prevent old men with grown-up daughters from marrying again,' agreed Lady Sturdham, in a tone which seemed to imply that the absence of such a prohibition from the statute-book was, in her

opinion, a subject for regret. 'But it will be a terrible trial for you, my poor dear, to see that —that person in your dear mother's place.'

'I never knew my mother,' replied Linda. 'It is my place that Mrs. Williams is going to take. Papa and I have been everything to each other all my life. I have kept house for him, and looked after his clothes, and kept his accounts ever since I was quite a little thing; and I know all his ways and fancies so well that I can't think anyone else will ever be able to understand him as I do. But that is all over now. She paused a moment, for her lips were quivering again, and she did not wish to break down. Then she resumed more cheerfully: 'I have no business to complain, I know. Mrs. Williams is not so bad as she seems. But it would be hopeless for me to attempt to be friendly with her; and I think she herself sees that.'

Lady Sturdham took Linda's hand and patted it kindly. 'Perhaps it will not be for long,' she said.

'My living with Mrs. Williams, do you

mean? It need not be at all, unless I like. Lord Keswick proposed to me this afternoon.'

Lady Sturdham forgot all about her headache. She whisked her little feet off the sofa, and bending forward, clasped both her niece's hands as she cried, 'My dearest Linda! I am so very, very glad!'

'Why should you be so glad, aunt?' asked Linda, smiling a little sadly. 'Is it such a very great honour to receive an offer from Lord Keswick? I did not say I had accepted him.'

Straightway Lady Sturdham's forehead became puckered into anxious lines. 'Oh, Linda,' she gasped, 'surely you have not—you cannot have——'

'Refused him? No, I had not that audacity. But I have not accepted him either, and I don't know whether I ever shall do so or not. I can't make up my mind, aunt, and I thought perhaps you could help me. You see I like him very much, and I am sure he would be kind to me—he is such an honest, simple little fellow!—but I don't—I don't love him, aunt.'

'I am *sure* you don't, my dear,' answered

Lady Sturdham, primly. 'Ever since I have known you I have felt quite certain that you were not the sort of girl to indulge in sentiments of that kind. Nowadays girls are so terribly independent and strong-minded that I often think it will end by their proposing to the men instead of waiting till they are asked—I do really. But I remember that my dear mother used to say that no lady should ever permit herself to feel anything more than a friendly interest in a gentleman till she was engaged to him; and as for love, that, I think, ought to come after marriage, not before it. Just think, my dear, what a dreadful thing it would be if a young lady were to—to fall in love with a gentleman who did not care for her.'

'But suppose she couldn't help herself?' Linda suggested.

'Indelicacy is a thing which every lady ought to be able to avoid,' replied Lady Sturdham, with some severity. 'But we need not discuss that question. If you are afraid to accept Lord Keswick because you think you only "like him very much," I can assure you that

you need hesitate no longer. Indeed, it would be very wrong to do so.'

'Well, let us consider that objection disposed of,' said Linda, with a short impatient sigh. 'But there is another one. He does not love me.'

'Oh, Linda, Linda,' said Lady Sturdham, shaking her grey curls with old-fashioned archness, 'how can you tell that?'

'Only by his own confession. In fact, he took a good deal of trouble to convince me that he was entirely free from any romantic feeling towards me, and that he would never have proposed to me if I had not happened to be rich. You look incredulous, Aunt Selina, but perhaps the world has changed since you were young. The simple truth is that Lord Keswick wants money, and believes that I want a title. So, as neither of us hates the other, he thinks we should get on very well together as husband and wife. That is exactly what he said. And I was very glad that he was generous enough to tell the truth.'

Lady Sturdham was one of the best-inten-

tioned women breathing. She said her prayers and read her Bible morning and evening, and honestly believed herself to be a follower of the precepts contained in the New Testament. Not for worlds would she have counselled a fellow-creature to commit a sinful action. Yet she made the following astounding reply:—

'From what you tell me, my dear, I am inclined to think that Lord Keswick has behaved most nobly. No man can be wholly indifferent to eighteen thousand a-year, though no doubt many a one would pretend to be so. His having alluded to your fortune quite convinces me that he is a young man of high principles and sensitive honour. I have long hoped that something might come out of your friendship with him, and now I am satisfied that your future life will be a happy one.' She added, by way of clinching the matter, 'James thinks so too.'

After that Linda gave up all hope of her aunt. She only said wistfully, 'I wish Uncle Jim were at home.'

'He has gone down to the country for a

week, my dear. You know one of our county members died the other day, and James wishes to be on the spot, in order to support the new candidate; for those dreadful Radicals have determined in the most foolish and useless way to contest the seat. But if he were here I am sure he would advise you just as I have done. He has a very high opinion of Lord Keswick.'

'And when does he come back?'

'Not for four or five days certainly; but it may be longer.'

'And I have to give Lord Keswick an answer within forty-eight hours. I should have liked to have asked Uncle Jim what he thought about it; but perhaps, as you say, he would have advised me as everyone else seems inclined to do; and perhaps, if he had recommended me to remain single, I should not have taken his advice, or if I had taken it I should have regretted it afterwards. So it does not much matter. I think I will write to Lord Keswick at once, and tell him that it is all settled. There is no object in putting it off

another day. Good-bye, aunt. I am glad you are pleased with my news.'

So Lady Sturdham kissed Linda and patted her on the shoulder, and bade her good-bye with a contented heart, thanking Heaven that her niece was about to escape from the dangerous influence of Mr. Howard, and to enter a family whose position in society was beyond question.

And Linda, as she was driven homewards through the crowded streets, almost persuaded herself that she was glad that Lord Sturdham had happened to be away. Uncle Jim's ideas upon the subject of love before or after marriage might not, she thought, have altogether coincided with those of Lady Sturdham's late mother, and he might have asked questions and expressed opinions which could only have resulted in unsettling his niece's mind and disposing her to think ill of what, upon the whole, was no doubt a very excellent arrangement. 'Papa wishes it,' thought Linda, 'and so do Lord and Lady Grassmere, and Aunt Selina and Mrs. Williams and Lord Keswick;

and the rest of the world (including myself, I think) does not care a rush one way or the other. Some people will be rejoiced at my consent, and nobody will be hurt by it. I must tell Ada Tower; and when she next writes to Mr. Mainwairing she can inform him that his anticipations have been realised, and that I have married a "big swell"—or am going to do so.'

The carriage had stopped before the big house in Lancaster Gate now.

'Horrid old house!' murmured Linda, apostrophising that eligible family mansion as she sat in the carriage waiting for the door to be opened. 'How I hate you! And what an utter delusion and disappointment you have been! I suppose I shall soon be able to sell you now and see the last of you. It is to be hoped that Lord Keswick will not want to live here, for nothing on earth would induce me to consent to that.'

Then she went upstairs to the drawing-room, and seating herself before her davenport, wrote swiftly, and without hesitation, the following note, which Lord Keswick duly found

on his plate the next morning at breakfast-time :—

'250 Lancaster Gate, July, 1867.'

'My dear Lord Keswick,—

'I have been thinking over your proposition since you left, this afternoon, and I really see no reason why I should keep you waiting any longer for my reply to it. I have made up my mind now that it shall be as you wish, and I dare say it will all turn out happily. At all events, it is a good thing that we start without any misunderstanding, and that neither of us will expect anything more than friendliness and perhaps occasional forbearance from the other. As we shall have plenty of money we shall not be obliged to see too much of one another. I fancy it is living in a small house that causes a good many of the quarrels between married people.

'I suppose I shall see you at the Duchess's. We can have a talk then, if it is necessary ; but I don't know that there is anything more to be said. 'Believe me

'Very truly yours,

'Linda Howard.'

Linda read over this artless composition with some satisfaction. It appeared to her to be business-like and to the point, and to express happily the complete indifference which she felt towards her suitor, and which she thought he ought to be made fully aware of. But Lord Keswick smiled slightly when he perused it, and muttered under his breath, 'Poor little girl!' He fancied that she had been a trifle piqued by his candour, and that a a slight flavour of romance thrown into his wooing would not have displeased her so much as her words seemed to imply. But there was time enough yet for that kind of thing, he said to himself, as he thrust Linda's note into his pocket and set to work with a fine appetite upon his devilled kidneys. He was in a state of high good humour and self-satisfaction. He had successfully accomplished his appointed task, and that in the most direct and honourable manner. He had gained a charming wife and handsome fortune, and it now only remained for him to hasten to Belgrave Square,

and receive the blessing of his affectionate and grateful parents.

The amount of gratification experienced by various deserving persons upon the announcement of Lord Keswick's engagement should have gone far towards consoling the betrothed couple for what both of them perhaps considered as in some sort a personal sacrifice. There was joy in the house of Williams and thankfulness in the house of Grassmere. Lady Sturdham in her gladness went straight off to Hunt and Roskell's and purchased a beautiful pearl necklace, which she despatched to her dear Linda, 'with fond love and every good wish from her old Auntie.' As for Mr. Howard, he tripped down to his club with the light heart and buoyant mien of youth; and chancing to meet Mr. Deane at the top of St. James's Street, he confided to him the good news, clapping him upon the shoulder with a force and joviality which greatly discomposed that very respectable gentleman.

'Come and dine with us, Deane, my boy,' said the proud father, 'and we'll drink hap-

piness to the young couple before you set to work upon your confounded parchments and settlements. I am thoroughly satisfied with the match, Deane—thoroughly satisfied.'

'And so, I hope, is Miss Howard,' Mr. Deane replied. 'Whatever makes her happy will make her friends happy too, I am sure.'

As far as appearances went there was no reason to doubt Miss Howard's happiness. At Lady Grassmere's ball, which took place a few days after the engagement had been publicly announced, it was generally observed that the young heiress was looking even prettier than usual, and that she talked, danced, and laughed with more animation than she generally exhibited. To be sure she did not seem to have much to say to her *fiancé*, nor he to her; but that might reasonably be attributed to a natural feeling of modesty; and, as Lady Sturdham remarked, 'dear Linda was never of an over-demonstrative turn.'

CHAPTER XIX.

AT SOUTHAMPTON.

A FINE schooner yacht was bowling merrily across the blue dancing waves of the Solent, heeling over under a fresh westerly breeze, which sent her on her way at a good nine knots an hour. There were only three people besides the helmsman in the after-part of the vessel: an elderly gentleman, in elaborately correct yachting costume, who, with his legs very wide apart, and his hands in the pockets of his jacket, was endeavouring to look as if he was quite accustomed to balancing himself upon a heaving slope as steep as the roof of a house; a fair-complexioned young man, who was lying full-length upon the white deck, face downwards, perusing a sporting paper; and a young girl, who had established herself upon a pile of rugs

and cushions in the stern, and was dreamily watching the flying water as it dashed from the side and foamed away to leeward.

The yacht was the 'Swallow,' a 200-ton schooner, the property of Lord Grassmere, who having gone in for nautical pursuits in his youth, as he had done for most expensive amusements, had kept on his yacht long after he had ceased to care about the sea, just as he had continued to entertain his friends at Ascot long after their society had become a heavy burden to him, and for equally good reasons.

The London season was a thing of the past; the Goodwood races were over, and so also was the Squadron regatta, from which the 'Swallow' was now returning. Lord and Lady Grassmere were at Homburg, recruiting their jaded systems by a course of mineral waters and early hours; and thus it had come about that Lord Keswick, having his father's yacht at his disposal, had prevailed on Miss Howard to run down to Cowes with him for a week, taking her father with her to play propriety.

That week was the pleasantest that had

fallen to Linda's lot since she had become a rich young woman. The fresh bracing sea-air did her good, and seemed to blow away all the worries and troubles that had vexed her little head so terribly of late. There were no fine ladies, no unmanageable servants, and no morning visitors on board the trim ship that lay at anchor off Cowes and rose and fell so gently and slumberously with the slow swell of the summer sea; and if there was an unavoidable *fiancé* there he was the most accommodating and considerate of *fiancés*, and never thought of exercising the authority or claiming the privileges which, as some people might have thought, belonged to his position.

It was a delightful, lazy time; a brief—only too brief—parenthesis, during which the past and the future might be altogether pushed out of one's life and all disturbing thoughts dismissed. A time when present existence and blue sky and sea and sunshine and briny breezes were enough, and when idleness passed away the hours as easily as, and far more agreeably than, occupation. Every day the racing

yachts spread their great white wings and came tearing past the 'Swallow' as she lay at anchor, looking, to inexperienced eyes, as if the smallest additional puff of wind must inevitably capsize them. With the aid of a pair of field-glasses and the information of the skipper Linda soon learnt to know them all and distinguish the colours of their tiny racing flags. She and her father and Keswick had a daily sweepstakes, into which they put five shillings apiece, and the result of which they awaited with intense anxiety.

In the evenings they played whist for two-penny points and sixpence on the rub, Mr. Howard taking dummy, and pretty generally rising up a winner. They got on very happily together these three, and were on excellent terms with one another; which was scarcely surprising, seeing that two of them had just obtained what they desired, and that the third was usually contented when she had made others so.

Never, since the memorable journey from Dresden to London, had Mr. Howard shown

himself so amiable, so cheerful, so charmingly playful as at this time. He made friends with the crew of the yacht, who thought him a very meddling, inquisitive old gentleman ; he smoked his cigar and talked of nautical matters with the captain, who, immediately detecting his ignorance, treated him with respectful contempt ; he was familiar and confidential with Keswick, who good-humouredly tolerated him ; and he was thoughtful and considerate in many small ways towards Linda, who was overjoyed at these marks of her readmission into the paternal favour. How thankful she was to see papa himself again ! How gladly did she hail the reappearance of certain small jokes which, in old days, had been an infallible sign of his approbation ; and how willingly did she add her contribution to the boisterous outburst of merriment with which the author of these pleasantries was in the habit of concluding them ! Wealth might be mere weariness, and the world a disappointment, and existence itself a doubtful blessing, but here at least were sunshine and free air, and a papa pleased with his daughter

and for the present was it not wisest to enjoy these good things, and forget what had passed and what was yet to come? But this condition of philosophic beatitude could not last long; and so we find the 'Swallow' cleaving the waves at the mouth of Southampton Water, and Miss Howard sitting on deck with a pensive countenance.

'I am so sorry it is over,' she remarked presently, as Lord Keswick, who had finished his paper, dragged himself on his hands and knees to her side. 'It has been great fun, hasn't it?'

'First-rate!' answered the young man, heartily. 'I should like to do it all over again.'

'Ah, that we shall never do.'

'Oh, yes, we shall. We'll come down for this very week next year.'

'But papa won't be with us then,' said Linda, sadly.

'Hm! Well, no; I suppose not. But we'll make up a jolly party somehow or other. I say, what a bore it is we are going to be mar-

ried in winter. We might have taken the yacht for our wedding-trip, eh? It wouldn't have been half a bad idea, would it? Get rid of servant and grinning landlords and all that kind of thing, you know. I always think newly-married couples look such precious fools travelling, don't you?'

'We might put off the day till next spring,' suggested Linda, calmly.

'I don't know what your governor would say to that,' replied Lord Keswick, not offering any objection on his own score.

'Or yours. No, we must do as we are bid, and be married on a bleak December morning, at St. James's, Piccadilly, and go to a gigantic breakfast afterwards, and have our healths proposed and rice thrown at us, and go down to Dover in the rain or snow, and be dreadfully sick crossing the next day. How horrid it will all be!'

'Awful!' assented the future bridegroom, with a groan. 'Why can't people be married without sending for all their friends and relations to make merry over them? It's deuced

bad taste. By-the-bye, Linda, where on earth are we to go for the honeymoon? Must go abroad, I suppose? What do you think of Italy?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Linda, with sudden impatience. 'Don't let us talk about it any more. Do you see that big steamer catching us up? I wonder where she is from?'

'What do you suppose that steamer is, Dawkins?' asked Lord Keswick of the captain, who was steering

'One of them American liners, my lord —North German Lloyd, I expect,' answered Dawkins, glancing over his shoulder at the huge black mass which was rapidly drawing nearer. Linda took up a pair of field-glasses and scanned the deck of the steamer. 'There seem to be a great many people on board,' she remarked carelessly as she turned to take a last look at Cowes, now growing indistinguishable in the distance.

If the glasses had been stronger, or if she had used them more carefully, she might almost have distinguished the features of a tall,

brown-bearded man who was leaning over the taffrail of the inward-bound steamer, and who was admiring the lines of the 'Swallow,' without feeling any special interest as to her occupants. He stood smoking his cigar, and kept his eyes fixed upon the yacht long after she had dropped astern, though he had ceased to think about her, and indeed no longer saw her. A fellow-passenger sauntered up to his side, and following the direction of his gaze, observed, 'That's a real smart little craft, Mr. Mainwairing. Do you know the name of her owner?'

'I can't say I do—or even her own name. I am not very good at distinguishing one yacht from another.'

'Well, sir, I am generally allowed to have a fairly good eye for a ship, and I can tell you that is a mighty nice little vessel. Belongs to one of your aristocracy, likely.'

'To an ironmaster or a brewer more probably,' answered Mainwairing, blowing out a cloud of blue smoke and watching it evaporate into the air. 'Those are the people who get

the good things of the world in these days. She is flying the Squadron burgee though, I see.'

'And do you mean to tell me, sir, that a man of business could not be a member of your Yacht Squadron if he felt like it?'

'Not at all; only he would have to be balloted for; and the Squadron is more exclusive than other yacht clubs.'

'I reckon he would be admitted if he were wealthy enough. Wealth, Mr. Mainwairing, will make its way, and will not be kept down by prejudice. I believe the aristocracies of Europe are beginning to understand this.'

'I fancy they have understood it for some time,' answered Mainwairing. '"Put money in thy purse" was considered to be sound advice some centuries ago; and as for prejudice, I don't think you will find that there is much remnant of that against commercial men in this country.'

'Well, sir, I hope not. I understand that some of your dukes and earls are putting their sons into trade as a profession; and very

wisely. What does an aristocracy without money amount to? Why, it is no aristocracy at all, and ought to be wiped out. Money, sir, is power, and money rules the world.'

'No doubt of it,' answered Mainwairing, flinging the end of his cigar overboard; 'and that makes it the more unfortunate that money should so often get into the wrong hands.'

He moved away, not caring to pursue the subject further; and, contemplating the shores of his native land and Netley Hospital looming through the sunny haze, had soon taken up the thread of his reflections at the point at which his American fellow-passenger had caused him to drop it.

Our friend Mainwairing's prospects have greatly improved, from a worldly point of view, since we saw him last. Having tired of Canada, he had drifted, in his usual aimless manner, to New York in the beginning of the summer, and was hesitating whether to remain a few months longer in the States or return to Europe, when a telegram informed him of the sudden death of his elder brother, and besought him

to come home at once. He took his passage in the first steamer that had a vacant berth, and set sail for the old country with feelings of a somewhat mixed nature.

His brother's death, which everybody else had long regarded as a by no means improbable contingency, was not only a real grief to him, but also a shock. He was not a man given to looking far forward; and he had always taken it for granted that poor old Tom would marry, some day or other, and have a family. For himself he had never anticipated more than his younger son's portion, with which, and with his collection of violins, he was, upon the whole, very well contented. But now he perceived—not altogether with pleasure—that his life must henceforth shape itself in different courses from those in which it had hitherto run. As the heir to a baronetcy and a large property, something more than the study of music must now occupy his time; and Mainwairing was not very sure that his new duties might not prove a great bore. He was not sure, either, how far he should be able to

adopt the tastes and pursuits of his father, with whom he would now be expected to reside; and he soon recollected, with alarm, that one of the first things which Sir George would require him to do would be to take unto himself a wife, lest he also should die and leave no heir behind him. Here was a prolific source of disagreement to start with, for Mainwairing had firmly resolved to live and die a bachelor.

It was characteristic of the man that he had been a couple of days at sea before a sudden thought struck him which put all other subjects out of his mind for the rest of the voyage. He remembered that the obstacles which had prevented him from declaring his love to Linda Howard, a year back, were now removed; and that, in his new position, he might pretend to the hand of any heiress in England without laying himself open to the imputation of ultra-mercenary motives. From that day forth Mainwairing became very restless and impatient towards the time at which the ship's run during the past four-and-twenty hours was announced. He grumbled outrageously when a head-wind

caused a temporary diminution of speed; and when, owing to a heated bearing, the engines were stopped for a few hours, he abused the captain, the crew, the engineers, and the North German Lloyd Company with such energy and fervour that he was treated, for the remainder of the voyage, with that respect which none but a man of ungovernable temper can command. What if he should be too late? What if he should find her engaged when he arrived in London? For I am sorry to say that this undutiful son had made up his mind to call at Lancaster Gate before going down to his father in Staffordshire. He was in a fever of anxiety and impatience. A few weeks earlier, when he had been sure that the object of his desires was for ever out of his reach, he had been able to contemplate, with some approach to resignation, the probability of Linda's marriage; and had even, as we know, written a few careless words to Miss Tower with a view to elicit any news there might be to be communicated on that subject; but now the idea of her becoming the wife of another man was intoler-

able; and so taken up was Mainwairing with the dread of this catastrophe that he forgot to worry himself with the question of whether he himself was likely to find favour in her eyes. And now that he was on the point of landing in England his spirits had fallen rather low; for, after all, what chance was there of a young lady of fashion being in London in the second week in August?

Meanwhile the unconscious Linda was pursuing her voyage to Southampton, and in process of time the 'Swallow' sailed past the big steamer as she lay at her moorings blowing off steam, whilst her passengers were hastening to get on shore. Linda and her father were due on the following day at Beechlands, Lord Sturdham's place, a few miles from Southampton, and Lord Keswick was to go to London by the afternoon express. Mr. Howard, who had business in town, had arranged to accompany his future son-in-law, and to return to Southampton the next day, Linda being left, for the time, at an hotel.

'See you again soon, I suppose?' Lord Kes-

wick remarked, standing at the door of the smoking-carriage, whither his betrothed had accompanied him to bid him good-bye.

'Oh, yes, I suppose so,' answered Linda. She added, with some hesitation, 'Do you wish me to write to you?'

'Oh, thanks,' said Lord Keswick, who had not yet given this subject a thought. 'If you don't mind—I should like it awfully. And you won't criticise my spelling when I answer, will you? I'm an awful beggar to spell badly. I think we *ought* to correspond,' he continued, in a lower tone. 'Not very often, of course—once a-week, or something like that. But it *is* the proper thing, you know, ain't it?'

Linda laughed outright.

'I don't know,' she said; 'I never was engaged before; but I think it would look better if I could tell Aunt Selina I had heard from you occasionally. Now you must get in, or you will be left behind. Good-bye, papa. Good-bye, Lord Keswick.'

She perched herself upon the step and kissed her father, and then held out her hand to

her *fiancé*. And indeed no warmer salute than a shake of the hand had as yet been exchanged between these unimpassioned young persons.

The train began to move, and Linda turned and walked slowly away, with a slight feeling of regret at parting with her undemonstrative lover. She had got to like little Keswick so much better of late. He was so simple, so unaffected and honest, that it would not have been a hard matter even to love him; and Linda sometimes thought she would be able to do so—in a certain way—when once she had become his wife. It is true that at other times she told herself that she could never marry him, and that she wished she were dead. But in her heart she knew that her fate was decided; and she knew, too, that, as *mariages de convenance* go, she was not unfortunate.

Now, as Linda was passing through the station doors with a slow step and a preoccupied mind, a tall gentleman, in a violent hurry, came running up from the opposite direction, and before he could stop himself had nearly run into her arms.

'I beg a thousand pardons,' said he, clutching at his hat, and diving past the lady whom he had so nearly upset without looking at her.

His rapid career was interrupted by a *nonchalant* porter.

'Express just gone, sir,' said that functionary, contemplating the sky with that exasperating serenity which his tribe always display under such circumstances.

'The devil!' cried the impetuous gentleman. Then he turned on his heel and exclaimed, 'Good gracious me!'—the latter ejaculation being prompted by his having caught sight of Linda, who, for her part, had recognised him a few seconds earlier.

'How do you do, Mr. Mainwairing?' said she, with all the calmness in the world. And how could he tell that her heart was beating as fast as his own?

He was utterly taken by surprise, and could only ejaculate stupidly—

'Miss Howard! Who in the world would have thought of seeing you here?'

'Why should I not be here?' she returned,

smiling. 'I have been to Cowes for the regatta, like everybody else. It is you who ought to give some account of yourself. When I last heard of you you were in Canada, and had no intention of returning to England for an indefinite time. What has brought you back, and in such a hurry, too?'

Mainwairing did not half like this cool greeting. In all his imaginary pictures of his entrance into Linda's drawing-room at Lancaster Gate—and he had drawn a good many such during the idle hours of the voyage—she had never behaved herself at all in this way. A little cry of surprise, a change of colour, a quick movement of welcome—surely a man appearing unexpectedly from the other side of the Atlantic might count upon that much. But no! There stood the subject of his dreams, as beautiful as —nay, more beautiful than ever—but as calm and undisturbed as if she had parted from him the day before. She wore a dark blue serge dress, he noticed, which fitted her admirably, and a grey felt hat, round which a white gauze veil was twisted. But while he scanned her

fair face eagerly and silently she drew the latter appendage down and disappeared behind it, murmuring something about the sun being so scorching. Mainwairing inwardly called down maledictions upon the head of the inventor of gauze veils, as I dare say many another man has done before him and will do again. At this moment his servant came up and informed him that there would be another train for London in two hours. Would he go by that or wait for the last train, which was a faster one?

'I have altered my mind, Davis,' answered Mainwairing; 'I shan't start till to-morrow. There is an hotel somewhere near this, isn't there?'

'Yes, sir, the South-Western.'

'Very well. Get a room there for me, and unpack what I shall want for the night.'

'Very good, sir,' said the man, and withdrew, wondering who the young lady might be who had obviously caused this sudden change of plans. He indulged himself with a good long stare at her, and muttered, as he marched away with his master's rugs and umbrellas—

'She's a well-shaped one, anyhow.'

For, though a cat may look at a king, neither a cat nor a valet can see through one of those abominable gauze veils, and the faithful Davis failed to recognise the young lady of Dresden, whose features had been sufficiently familiar to him at one time.

'Which way are you going, Miss Howard?' asked Mainwairing, when his valet had departed. 'May I walk with you?'

'Of course,' answered Linda. 'Papa has gone up to London, and will not be back till to-morrow evening. I was just wondering what I should do with myself till dinner-time when you fell from the clouds and almost knocked me down. I will walk wherever you please, and as long as you will put up with my company, for I have a hundred things to ask you about. Are you ready to be catchised?'

Mainwairing of course professed his willingness to gratify Miss Howard's curiosity as far as it lay in his power to do so; and so they strolled away down the broad quiet street, she putting question after question to him about Canada

and his life and amusements there, and he replying somewhat at random, his thoughts being occupied with other matters.

Southampton is not a very large town, and if you walk quietly along the main street with a pleasant companion you are apt to find yourself in the open country sooner than you would expect. Linda and Mainwairing were out among the green fields and hedgerows before either of them had well perceived that they had left the town behind them. By this time a good deal of mutual information had been imparted. The death of Mainwairing's elder brother and Mr. Howard's engagement to Mrs. Williams had been announced, and had elicited such conventional expressions of sympathy as are usual on occasions of domestic calamity between people who are scarcely well enough acquainted to venture upon a more free declaration of their feelings. But not a word had been said about Lord Keswick. Why Linda refrained from openly stating what could not long remain a secret she hardly knew. Several times the confession rose to her lips, but, for some reason

or other, she could not bring herself to give utterance to it. She thought perhaps Mainwairing would question her when she told him that she had been to Cowes in Lord Grassmere's yacht, but he did not do so. He only remarked that he supposed she was on intimate terms with all the great people now, and asked her whether she still kept her old opinion that money was the chief of all blessings.

'No,' she answered, rather dolefully; 'I was not long in changing my mind about that. Do you remember the dear old days at Blasewitz, when I played your accompaniments, and you used to scold me for wishing to be rich?'

'I remember every day and every hour I spent at Blasewitz,' he answered; 'but I don't recollect scolding you. And you, too, think of old times occasionally, do you?'

'Oh, yes,' said Linda, with a sigh; 'and I often wish the old times could come back again. But there is no use in wishing for impossibilities.'

'So now you want to be poor again. Might one ask why?'

'Only because I was happier when I was poor. I can't tell you exactly why things have gone wrong with me since I have been rich; but they have. For one thing, I am sure papa would never have dreamt of marrying again if this wretched money had not all come to me. He could not bear to be dependent upon his daughter; you can easily understand that. And then there are so many things that make money a burden One feels that one ought to be doing some good with it, if one only knew how, instead of using it only for luxuries and as a way of getting into society, which I don't a bit care about. Don't you think it is humiliating to be visited by people who are only civil to you because you are rich? I think no nation on earth worships wealth as the English do.'

'You used to wish to be rich, I remember, because you fancied they slighted you on account of your poverty, Now, it seems, you don't care whether they slight you or not.'

'Not much. I used to think that if ever I became a rich woman I would take my revenge

upon them by refusing to know them ; but one can't do that, and it would be hardly worth while if one could. Mrs. Tower came to call upon me the other day, and made herself as fascinating as if she had a son on the look-out for an heiress. And all the time she was talking I couldn't help thinking of that evening on the Brühlische Terrasse, when she turned down the corners of her mouth and sniffed at me, and of how angry I was, and of how very little it signified after all. Ada and I have become great friends, you know. I have heard of you sometimes from her. You and she are constant correspondents, are you not?'

'Hardly that,' said Mainwairing. 'I am a very poor correspondent at the best of times, but Ada writes to me pretty frequently, and of course, every now and then, I have to send her a line or two.'

'What a very ungallant speech!' exclaimed Linda, though she was secretly not displeased at his indifferent tone. 'I have a great mind to repeat it to Ada, only I don't wish to be ill-natured. You know I used to say I was sure

you would end by marrying Ada; and I am not yet convinced that I was wrong.'

'I shall never marry Ada Tower,' said Mainwairing, with a certain solemnity of emphasis.

'Are you quite sure of that?'

'Quite; and I will tell you why.'

He paused as if he expected some encouragement; so Linda said, 'Why?'

They were walking on the grass by the side of the high road, which stretched, white, dusty, and solitary, before them into the distance. It was a still, hot afternoon, and the whole earth seemed drowsy. The breeze which had sent the 'Swallow' so swiftly on her way in the morning had given place to a dead calm, and there was no sound in the air except a sleepy buzzing of insects. Some moss-grown logs, piled up by the wayside, looked as if they had been placed there for the benefit of weary pedestrians. Mainwairing pointed to them.

'Let us sit down,' he said, 'and I will tell you all about it.'

Linda seated herself silently upon the topmost log, wondering a little what he was going

to tell her, and Mainwairing took up his position at her feet.

'I shall not marry Ada Tower,' said he, in a low, deliberate voice, 'because, if I ever marry at all, my wife will be—somebody else.'

Linda, who had raised her veil, would have liked to have dropped it again now, for she felt that she was blushing, and she was furious with herself for being so silly and school-girlish. What reason had she to blush because Mr. Mainwairing had made up his mind whom he was going to marry? But it would make matters worse to hide her face, so she said 'Yes?' in a perfectly steady voice, and her colour gradually faded away as she waited for him to go on.

'Linda,' he said abruptly, 'I love you.'

It was not an eloquent avowal; but it had at least the merit of being free from ambiguity. Linda's heart gave a great leap. She had one brief flash of joy and triumph, and then a cold, sick feeling of despair crept over her, and seemed to turn her to stone. She neither stirred nor spoke.

Mainwairing started to his feet. He thought she was going to faint. 'What is it?' he asked, in a tone of some alarm. 'Have I frightened you?'

Linda tried to smile. 'No,' she said; 'it is nothing. But I had better tell you at once that I am engaged to be married to Lord Keswick.'

A long silence. Linda looked down, and trembled like a criminal. To anyone else in the world she would have spoken of her engagement without fear or shame; but in the presence of this man, who said he loved her, and whom she now knew only too well that she had loved from the first, she felt as guilty as if this projected marriage had been planned by her, instead of by those who hoped to make their profit out of it, and as if she had been faithless to the one who really loved her for herself. For it never occurred to her to doubt Mainwairing's disinterestedness. In her distress and confusion she almost expected that he would upbraid her for her perfidy; and it was with no small trepidation that she waited for the

effect of her announcement. But Mainwairing took it more quietly than she had expected,

'Don't distress yourself, Miss Howard,' he said, gently. 'I know you are too kind not to be sorry for me; but it can't be helped, and I must try to put a brave face upon it. It is no fault of yours, you know, that you can't love me, any more than it is my fault that I can't help loving you. Goodness knows I have tried hard enough!' he added, with a rather grim laugh.

Linda shot a timid sidelong glance at him. 'Why did you try?' she asked. It was perhaps hardly wise of her to interrogate him upon the subject; but the temptation was too strong for her.

'It was a question of money,' he answered, with a dreary shrug of his shoulders, 'like most other things. When I first knew you you were poor, and so was I. I was too selfish to give up a great many small luxuries which I should have had to do without if I had married in those days; so I hesitated—and went away. Then, when I found out that you were worth

more to me than anything else in the world, I went back to Dresden to tell you so; and, behold! you were transformed into a great heiress. You see how it was that I could not speak then. Well, then I went away to Canada, and thought I would try to forget you there; and of course I didn't. You were too poor at first, you see, and too rich afterwards. And now that I am rich too, and am free to tell you my story, I find out—what perhaps you will say I might have thought of before. But I am sure you will forgive me if I have been too presumptuous. You know what a dreamy, absent-minded sort of fellow I am. I am always thinking of something else when I part my hair in the morning, and I haven't shaved for years. Else perhaps I might have noticed what an old fogey I am getting, and how little chance I should be likely to have against a good-looking young fellow like Lord Keswick.'

He assumed as light a manner as he could command, partly to conceal his mortification and partly because he thought Linda looked more distressed than the occasion warranted.

He was glad that she should sympathise with him, but he did not wish to make her unhappy.

'Don't trouble yourself any more about me, Miss Howard,' he went on, seeing how grave and pale she looked. 'Tell me about yourself. Are you—are you very fond of Lord Keswick?'

'I like him very well,' said Linda, without looking up. Her tone, still more than her words, excited Mainwairing's suspicions.

'What do you mean by "liking him very well?"' he asked. 'Why do you look so oddly? Upon my word, Miss Howard, I believe you don't care a straw for the fellow.'

'Oh, yes, I do,' she answered, quietly. 'I like him very much in a way. It is not a love-match. Neither he nor I ever pretended that, or wished anyone to suppose it. The truth is my money will be useful to him; and I—I was very lonely, and wanted a home. And he is very kind and good-natured. *Voilà!*'

'I could have given you a home, Linda,' said Mainwairing, sadly. 'And if you had married me there would have been love upon one side, at all events. Good God!' he went

on, with more animation, 'you cannot be allowed to throw away your life like this. Break off this impossible engagement; it is not too late yet. And, oh, Linda, if you would marry me, I would not ask or expect that you should love me at first. That would come in time, I know; and I should be content to wait. How can you ever be happy with a man who admits that he does not care for you? And what have you in common with young Keswick, who hasn't two ideas in his head beyond a knowledge of horse-flesh? You and I understand each other; we have very much the same tastes and habits; we like the same kind of life. I will not give up hope. If you love no one else, why should not I have as good a chance as another?'

Linda was moved, for a moment, by his vehemence, which affected her the more from its contrast with his usual lazy manner. For a moment she thought she would tell him all; would confess that she loved him better than all the world; and, cutting herself free at one blow from all the trammels that bound her to the past, would set forth anew into a blissful

future. But it was only for a moment. A row of familiar faces started up before her mind's eye and warned her back into the path of duty. Her father, furious and menacing; Lady Sturdham, shocked and grieved; poor Lord Grassmere, bowed down by the returning flood of his embarrassments; honest little Keswick, mutely reproachful—the images of all these flitted before her; and she summoned up all her courage to resist temptation. It was too late now, she said to herself. She had given her word; the die was cast; her fate was sealed. She looked up at Mainwairing, and shook her head—rather mournfully, it must be confessed.

He took courage from this, thinking that she was giving way, and pleaded his cause with more earnestness than before. But he began to falter at length, for he saw that his eloquence was producing no impression whatever. The girl looked wretched enough certainly; but her pale face was as passionless as marble. He doubted whether she even took in the sense of what he was saying. The truth is that Linda was like one who, creeping along the face of a

precipice, feels that his best chance of safety lies in his power of temporarily suspending his thinking faculties, or at least of concentrating them upon the one object of advancing. If he allow his mind to dwell for an instant upon the giddy depth beneath him, he may lose his head, his balance, and his life. One thing only Linda saw, or fancied she saw, clearly—that it was her duty to marry Lord Keswick; and to that idea she adhered bravely, if mistakenly, not suffering herself to listen to the persuasions of her own heart on the one side, or to the pleadings of her lover on the other.

Exactly what passed after she had taken up this stubborn position she could not subsequently recall to mind. She remembered that there had been a long colloquy, during which Mainwairing had been by turns imploring, impatient, and angry; she did not recollect what she had said to him; but she knew that she had striven to make him understand that her determination was irrevocable, and that she could never become his wife. That she must have succeeded in convincing him in the end was certain, for

at last he sprang to his feet, saying, 'Then it is all over, Miss Howard. I see now that you could never have learnt to love me. Perhaps you are right, and Lord Keswick is more suited to you than I. Shall we go back now?'

Linda rose mechanically, and meekly followed him, as he strode along the dusty road towards the town. In justice to Mainwairing it must be said that he had no idea of how fast he was walking. Tramp, tramp, tramp—how hot and airless and sultry it was! Linda felt, as one sometimes does in bad dreams, that she had been walking like this all her life, and must go on till the end of it. Her head was swimming, her eyes were hot and dim, and her knees trembled under her.

Shortly afterwards, a lady, who happened to be driving into Southampton, in an open carriage, to do an afternoon's shopping, observed in front of her the backs of an apparently very unsociable couple. On the one side of the road marched a tall man, who switched viciously at the hedge with his cane as he walked, while, on

the other, a girl dressed in blue serge toiled wearily along, with drooping head and downcast mien.

'A lovers' quarrel,' thought the lady, who was of a benevolent disposition. 'Poor girl! how tired she looks, and what a wretch the man must be to make her walk at such a pace in this broiling sun!'

She scrutinised the pair with some half-amused interest as the carriage drew nearer to them; but when she was close enough to the girl to discern her features she threw up her hands with a gesture of surprise not unmixed with dismay.

'Stop, Rogers, stop!' she cried to the coachman. 'Good gracious, Linda, my child! what are you doing here?'

Linda, as may be imagined, was not overjoyed at recognising Lady Sturdham; but after what she had gone through that afternoon, her self-control was not to be upset by so trifling a *contretemps* as this.

'Is it you, Aunt Selina?' she said, summoning up the ghost of a smile. 'How fortu-

nate! Will you give me a lift into Southampton? For I am simply dropping with fatigue. Mr. Mainwairing has walked me off my legs. I don't think you know my aunt, Lady Sturdham, Mr. Mainwairing?'

Mainwairing, who had been standing on the other side of the carriage, tugging moodily at his moustache, took off his hat.

'Not Sir George Mainwairing's son?' said Lady Sturdham, interrogatively.

Mainwairing said, 'Yes.'

'Oh. I thought—surely your friends imagine that you are in America?'

'I only arrived this afternoon from New York.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Lady Sturdham, looking a good deal mystified and not over well pleased. 'Can I take you back to Southampton, Mr. Mainwairing?'

'Thank you, no,' answered Mainwairing, rather curtly; 'I will not trouble you; I prefer to walk. Good-bye, Miss Howard.'

He raised his hat again; and presently the carriage had left him far behind.

'My dear,' said Lady Sturdham at once, 'where is your father?'

'Papa was obliged to go up to London this afternoon,' Linda answered. 'He will be down to-morrow; and I am to wait for him at Radley's Hotel.'

'Surely it would have been a better plan for you to have come straight to us. But I never could understand your papa. What was the matter with that young man? He looked very strange, I thought.'

Linda remarked disingenuously that Mr. Mainwairing had just lost his brother.

'Oh, nonsense, my dear,' returned the old lady, rather sharply. 'His brother died weeks ago; and besides, he must have expected it for a long time. There was something more than that the matter with him.'

'Was there?' said Linda. 'Perhaps it was the heat.'

And though Lady Sturdham cross-examined her niece at considerable length as to the origin and duration of her acquaintance with Mainwairing, and administered to her a gentle

lecture upon the impropriety of roving about the country with young men, she obtained no information whatever relating to what had taken place in the course of that special walk, and was driven to the conclusion that Mr. Mainwairing had proposed, and been refused. 'Which, after all, would be of no consequence,' she thought. 'Lord Keswick is not likely to be jealous.'

Linda, on being left at the hotel, went upstairs, and flung herself upon her bed in a state of total exhaustion, mental and physical. She ate no dinner that evening, and lay awake the whole night through, tossing to and fro with a splitting headache, her hands and feet burning with fever.

'I am going to have an illness,' she thought, when the first chill of dawn came through the open window and set her shivering violently. 'Perhaps I shall die. Well, I shan't much mind.'

CHAPTER XX.

MR. DEANE IS DISGUSTED.

By the time that Linda had taken her bath and put on her clothes she was forced, rather against her will, to admit to herself that she was not going to be ill at all, and that there was nothing worse the matter with her than an aching heart and an aching head. It was rather a disappointment. Things had come to such a pass with her that she would have welcomed a good brain-fever, or any other disease which would have brought with it unconsciousness and oblivion, and might even have cut the knot of her difficulties in one way or another. She had declared, the day before, that her mind was made up, and that nothing should tempt her to draw back from the destiny which she had voluntarily accepted, But it is one thing

to resolve and another to perform ; and, for all her courage, Linda could not feel sure that her strength would hold out to the end.

She remained in her room all day, fearing to leave the house, lest she should again encounter Mainwairing, who had not mentioned by what train he intended to leave ; and no half-hearted wretch, hesitating between the dictates of his conscience and the temptation to commit a crime, could have passed a more miserable morning than did this unfortunate girl, whose only doubt was whether she had sufficient heroism to make shipwreck of her whole life for the advantage of a few selfish people who would never know or appreciate the sacrifice she was making for them.

She compared herself mentally to a recruit going under fire, who dares not advance, and will not run away, and who, if left to himself, would, in the natural course of things, come to a dead stand-still. But as, in the case of the soldier, such a solution of the difficulty would be a physical impossibility—he being of necessity forced forward by the advancing mass be-

behind him, and perhaps, if need be, by an admonishing poke from a friendly bayonet—so the mere force of time and the sequence of events bade fair to carry Linda on to the inevitable end; and we know that she had one or two friends at her back who were prepared to keep her up to her duty by means of a moral bayonet-thrust, should that manner of persuasion appear necessary.

Such a one was, indeed, unconsciously administered, that very afternoon, by Mr. Howard, who returned from London in high spirits, bringing with him a roll of music and a short note from Lord Keswick, in which Miss Howard was begged to accept 'the pieces which she had said she wanted.' There were one or two more, the writer said, which he had been unable to obtain; but he was going to ransack the music-shops for them the next day, and would send them down to her, if his search proved successful

If Lord Keswick had known the conflict which was going on in the girl's mind he could scarcely have selected a present more likely to

further his own cause. A ring or a bracelet would not have touched her much. Such things are to be bought at the first jeweller's, and Lord Keswick was not the man to hesitate over the price of anything that might happen to take his fancy. But the fact that he had expended a few shillings in buying this music showed, not only that he had noticed and remembered a careless passing wish, but also that he had taken considerable pains to gratify it; for the pieces were old ones, and not to be met with in every music-shop.

The amount of gratitude which Linda felt for this small attention would have been quite incomprehensible to a girl more accustomed to having her wishes anticipated. She slipped away to her bedroom and cried heartily for the first time since her interview with Mainwairing, declaring to herself that she had misjudged Lord Keswick, that he was kinder to her than anyone had ever been before, that she was not worthy of him, and that she had been wicked to think for a moment of throwing him over. Then she dried her eyes, prayed, poor little

soul! that she might be enabled to do her duty, and set out for Beechlands, with her father, in a more composed frame of mind.

Beechlands is a fine old place, standing on a rising ground, with terraces and lawns and a blaze of flowers round about it, and undulating reaches of well-timbered park beyond; but it is not an amusing house to stay in. Lord and Lady Sturdham are old-fashioned people, and have old-fashioned ways. Breakfast, preceded by family prayers, takes place at nine o'clock; there is a heavy luncheon at one, dinner at seven, and at half-past ten the butler brings in the bedroom candlesticks. During the shooting season the house is tolerably full of visitors, and then a decorous gaiety takes possession of the place. The billiard-room is kept lighted up to midnight; the drag is taken out of the coach-house; excursions to Netley Abbey, and other local lions, are organised; ponderous dinner-parties are holden in the big dining-room; and sometimes a quasi impromptu dance is got up. But at all other times of the year Beechlands is anything but lively quarters;

and such unsuspecting people as find their way thither in July or August generally discover that they have another visit to pay in a different part of the country before they have been Lord Sturdham's guests above a day or two.

Poor Mr. Howard was driven to the verge of despair by the monotony of his existence with his relations, and confided to his daughter that he should not be able to stand it much longer.

'Hang it all! I can't get up in the middle of the night and dine in the middle of the afternoon,' said this man of fashion, plaintively. 'I hate farming, and I am getting sick of smoking cigars in the conservatory and talking to the gardener all day. After dinner your uncle tells his confounded long yarns, and falls asleep in the middle of them, by Jove! I must be off somewhere, Linda, or the slowness of life will be the death of me.'

There had been a time when Mr. Howard had dined at five o'clock, and had occupied his days chiefly in loafing about the streets of Dresden; but he had nearly forgotten this

period of his life, and if he had been reminded of it would probably have denied that he had then been alive at all—having been, as it were, in the chrysalis stage, previous to his manifestation to the world in his present character of a mature butterfly.

Linda did not mind the dulness of Beechlands. What she chiefly desired, just then, was rest and peace ; and these blessings she found—at least to some extent—in the mode of life of which her father complained so pathetically. The contrast between the sober, methodical fashion in which the days glided on at Beechlands and the noise and bustle of London was most soothing to her. The stately old house, with its spacious staircase, its oak panelling black with age, its stained-glass windows, its long corridors, from whose walls rows of departed plain-featured Blounts looked gravely down, its trophies of casques and pikes and swords, and the faint old-world scent of *pot-pourri* which pervaded it throughout, seemed to belong to another and a nobler age than the crowded, money-grubbing, vulgar city

which she had left behind her. Little Lady Sturdham, in her silks and laces, came sweeping noiselessly over the worn Turkey carpet of the passages, looking like one of the old pictures stepped out of its frame; Lord Sturdham's cheery voice, calling his niece to come out for a walk with him, echoed through the house, as he stamped in at the front-door with his dogs at his heels. At seven o'clock a clanging bell announced to all who dwelt within a mile or two that my lord was about to sit down to dinner. It was more like the English life of which Linda had read in books than anything she had yet witnessed; and she was beginning to think that Uncle Jim, in his threadbare velveteen coat and gaiters, was more like the ideal English nobleman than Lord Grassmere, in all the glory of his Court suit and Garter.

Linda did not share her father's dislike to matters connected with farming. She was always glad to accompany her uncle to the Home Farm, which was his especial hobby; and though she could not pretend to under-

stand much about the price of hay and wheat, or the latest improvements in agricultural machinery, she admired the strength and beauty of the gigantic cart-horses, with their scarlet collars and ribbons; she liked feeding the ducks and chickens and poking at the pigs with a long stick, and she thoroughly appreciated the dark, cool dairy, where the pans of yellow cream stood, and a little fountain splashed musically into a marble basin. And that, as Lord Sturdham justly remarked, was as much as you could expect from a woman.

It soon came to be an understood thing that Linda should join her uncle in his morning walk, which sometimes took him to the farmyard, sometimes to the kennels, and sometimes to the harvest-fields, where the reapers were already at work; and the only drawback to her pleasure in these rambles was Uncle Jim's inveterate tendency to recur to the subject of her marriage, and rally her thereupon with an old-fashioned jocularity which, under the circumstances, was especially embarrassing and distressing. He always spoke of the coming event as if it were

a marriage of affection on both sides ; and before very long Linda discovered that such was in truth his honest belief. For some reason, not very accurately defined in her mind, she could not bring herself to undeceive him ; so she bore with his small jokes as best she could, though sometimes—for she had become very nervous and easily affected of late—they brought the tears into her eyes.

One day, when the innocent old gentleman had been making himself more than usually intolerable in this manner, Linda pleaded a headache, and said, if Uncle Jim didn't mind, she would go back to the house. Lord Sturdham, who looked upon headaches as a mysterious affliction, part of the original curse under which all the daughters of Eve labour, and the nature of which is hardly to be understood by a male creature, dropped the corners of his mouth, and gave utterance to the sympathetic moan which he knew that his wife always expected from him under similar circumstances.

'Go and lie down at once, my dear,' he said. 'And ask your aunt for some of her sal

volatile—that's the best cure for a headache. Or a glass of port wine—some people find that a good thing. Will you take my arm back to the house?'

'Oh, dear no, thank you, uncle,' said Linda, rather amused. 'Finish your walk; and I will go slowly home. I shall be all right before dinner-time.'

So she went her way, sadly enough, across the park, letting the tears run down her cheeks without restraint, now that there was nobody to see them. 'Will it always be like this?' she wondered despairingly. 'Am I to be miserable, and conceal my misery, for the rest of my natural life? I suppose not. I suppose, when I have been married a year or two, I shall have got over this, and be as fond of Lord Keswick as most wives seem to be of their husbands. Not passionately fond, of course, but just properly and soberly attached, as one might be to an elder brother. But, oh! how shall I ever bear to meet *him* as an ordinary acquaintance, and make civil speeches to his wife? For of course he will forget me, and marry somebody

else—Ada Tower, most likely. Men are not like us. Some years hence, I dare say, he will tell her the whole story, and wonder how he could ever have been so infatuated about me.'

These reflections, and others arising out of them, brought Linda to the hall-door. There she encountered the butler, who informed her that a gentleman was in the library waiting to speak to her. At that moment Linda could think of but one gentleman who was likely to have come down to Beechlands to seek her out; and though he was dearer to her than the whole world, she would gladly have avoided seeing him; for what could he have to say to her, or she to him, which could be productive of anything but a renewal of unhappiness to them both? She turned the handle of the library-door, therefore, with a beating heart, and was much relieved to find that the only tenant of the room was Mr. Deane.

The old solicitor, who had his back turned to the door, and was poring over a book of prints, started up at the noise of Linda's entrance and advanced towards her with a coun-

tenance expressive of great solemnity and concern.

'My dear young lady,' he said, 'I have come to see you upon a most serious, and, I am sorry to say, a most unpleasant matter of business.'

All matters of business being equally unpleasant to Linda, she did not attach much importance to this preamble. 'What is it, Mr. Deane?' she asked, rather wearily, seating herself, and taking off her hat.

Mr. Deane fidgetted, put on his spectacles, took them off again, changed his chair, and at last began.

'I must ask you to prepare yourself for some bad news.'

'I am quite prepared,' answered Linda, confidently, feeling well assured that no news could make things worse for her than they already were.

'I want to prepare you,' resumed Mr. Deane, 'for a great change in your circumstances—a change which, I am sure, no one can regret more unfeignedly than I do. But we must take

what is sent us.' Here he paused again, and looked at Linda doubtfully.

'Well?' said she.

'It seems, then, that the will under which you enjoy your late uncle's property, and which, as you may remember, is dated some eighteen months back, is null and void, having been set aside by a subsequent and much more informal document; but one which I am bound to admit is altogether unassailable.'

'Then I am poor again!' exclaimed Linda, excitedly.

'Now, my dear young lady,' implored the lawyer, holding up his hands entreatingly, 'pray do not agitate yourself, and hear me out. It is a bad business; but not perhaps so utterly bad as you may suppose. I have been a good deal put out by it myself, because, as I think I have told you, the previous will was drawn out under my personal supervision; and though my old friend frequently spoke to me upon the subject, he never led me to suppose that he had changed his mind with regard to the disposition of his property. Why he should have done so

without consulting me, merely making use of an ordinary sheet of letter-paper as a means of bequeathing his wealth, is more than I can understand. However, let that pass. There is the will; and the signature is duly attested. The document was brought to me by Hudson, the butler, who found it, he says, while dusting out a bureau in the room which, I understand, has lately been used by your father as his study. It was among a number of other papers, which would appear to have been left undisturbed since your uncle's death. It is dated only a week previous to his decease; and a thorough search, which I ventured to make immediately at Lancaster Gate, has failed to bring to light any more recent document. Now, as to the provisions, which are very short and simple. Your father is to have a life-interest in the whole of the property, real and personal, with remainder to you. The other legacies are the same as in the first will.'

Linda had risen from her chair, and was standing before Mr. Deane, with parted lips and wide-opened eyes.

'Is this true?' she exclaimed. 'Are you quite sure there is no mistake?'

'Why, what mistake can there be?' retorted the old lawyer, a little testily. 'Haven't I seen this ridiculous document with my own eyes? And should I have come down here to tell you you were disinherited if there had been any doubt about its validity? No, no, my dear Miss Howard, there is no use in disputing the facts. The money which we all believed belonged to you is, for the time being, vested in your father; and the only thing we can do is to make the best of it.'

'Make the best of it!' echoed Linda, in a tone of triumphant joy. 'Why, my dear Mr. Deane, do you really call this bad news? Bad news indeed! It is the best news I have heard for a year, and far, far better news than I ever expected to have heard again. I must go and tell papa at once.'

'You are in a very great hurry to get rid of eighteen thousand a-year, I must say,' grumbled Mr. Deane. 'It is all very well to put a good face upon misfortune, but it is not necessary to

rejoice over it; and what possible cause you can have——'

'Mr. Deane,' interrupted Linda, conclusively, 'you have never been a girl with heaps of money, and therefore you can't judge of my feelings. If you had told me that every penny of it had gone to a stranger I should not have cared a bit—at least, so far as I myself am concerned; but as papa has got it I am overjoyed. Because that is what I always wished for from the beginning.'

'But, Miss Howard—excuse me—I don't think you quite understand—you can hardly have realised yet what a serious matter this is. You must pardon me for reminding you that Lord Keswick, as well as yourself, has a strong interest in your fortune. Yes, yes; I know what you would say. Young people never think much about ways and means. But their friends have to think for them; and from what I have heard from Lord Grassmere's solicitors I greatly fear that your life, as the daughter-in-law of a nobleman with a certain position to

keep up, will entail a good deal of economy and self-denial.'

This view of the subject had certainly not yet presented itself to Linda; but it did not appear to cause her much disquietude.

'Of course I shall release Lord Keswick from his engagement,' she answered promptly.

'A very generous impulse, my dear young lady,' said Mr. Deane, who perhaps rated this exhibition of magnanimity a little more highly than it deserved; 'but it is scarcely to be supposed that his lordship will take advantage of it. The fact is—not to mince matters—it looks to me very much as if you would have to live almost entirely upon what your papa may be disposed to allow you; and what that will be we can't, of course, tell. I fear it may be but little.'

'I am sure that whatever papa does will be the right thing,' said Linda, up in arms at once.

'No doubt—no doubt. I should be the last man in the world to assert the contrary,'

answered Mr. Deane, rather irritably. He added, under his breath, by way of relieving his feelings, 'He can't touch the principal, and he can't live for ever; there's comfort in that.'

'And whatever happens,' continued Linda, 'I am thankful to be rid of this detestable money. It has never given me any happiness; and it ought never to have been left to me at all. I am very glad my uncle saw his mistake before he died.'

'Well, well,' said Mr. Deane, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. 'Now, I suppose, I had better see your papa.'

'I will go and look for him,' said Linda, picking up her hat, and leaving the room with a light step and a lighter heart.

When she was gone Mr. Deane indignantly apostrophised space.

'Don't talk to me about reason and common sense and men of business!' he exclaimed. 'Tom Howard was no better than an old fool. All the interest of his hard-won money to be made ducks and drakes of for years and years

to come! For that superannuated dandy will live to be eighty, I know—it would be just like him! And as for the poor girl, why, that young lord will throw her over, as sure as my name's what it is; and her father will bully her to the end of his life, and she'll only say "Thank you." Bah! I am disgusted with the whole business! Tom Howard, you unspeakable ass, if I only had you here I'd—I'd punch your head for you!'

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. HOWARD AND LADY GRASSMERE ACCOMMODATE THEMSELVES TO CIRCUMSTANCES.

GREAT was the perturbation caused in the Grassmere family by the news of Miss Howard's loss of fortune. Lord Keswick, though considerably taken aback, was for marrying Linda, *quand même*; but, as was to be expected, the family decision was against any such Quixotism. Lady Grassmere, who received the melancholy intelligence in a letter from her son, in which he also expressed his determination to keep to his engagement, hurried back post-haste from Homburg, after telegraphing to the young man to meet her in London on her arrival.

In obedience to these instructions, Lord Keswick presented himself at the big house in Belgrave Square, which, with its closed shutters

and unwashed door-steps, looked dismal enough at this season of the year, and was let in by a travel-stained maid, who informed him that my lady had already arrived, and was waiting for him in her boudoir. Mounting the stairs, he found his mother sitting, almost in the dark, over a cup of tea, haggard and worn, the little curls over her forehead all limp and disarranged, and her blooming complexion replaced by a pair of lined and yellow cheeks from which the dust and blacks of many railways had not yet been removed. She looked such an old, old woman, as she sat in her dim corner, that even Lord Keswick, unobservant as he was, was startled, and exclaimed, in a tone of remonstrance, 'I say, mother, you've been over-tiring yourself!'

'I am half-dead,' replied Lady Grassmere, faintly; 'but it doesn't matter. I could not possibly rest without seeing you, after your shocking letter.'

'It's a bore, isn't it?' said Lord Keswick, seating himself, and lifting up Lady Grassmere's pug by the tail.

'It is quite too dreadful,' answered Lady Grassmere, in heartbroken accents. 'I don't know what I have done that things of this kind should always happen to me. Please be so kind as to leave Planchette alone; my nerves are completely shattered; and her howls are more piercing than those of any dog I ever had in my life. Planchette, my love, come to your mother! Of course there must be an end of everything. I am very sorry for it, for I really liked the girl; but the idea of your marrying a pauper is too utterly preposterous.'

'She won't be exactly a pauper, you know,' Lord Keswick remarked. 'Her father has promised to secure her an allowance of three thousand a-year the day of her marriage.'

In truth Mr. Howard, in the first glow of his prosperity, and in his desire to have a viscount for his son-in-law, had actually made this generous offer.

'People of that kind would make any sacrifice to get into society,' said Lady Grassmere, ungratefully. 'Three thousand a year! it is absurd. If he had said eight—and then,

taking her prospects into consideration—— But no! the thing is not to be thought of. You had better go away somewhere for a time. Why don't you go to Norway and fish? Or to Russia—that would be better, perhaps—and you could make a long trip of it, and not come back till after Christmas. I can easily get you introductions to all the people worth knowing in St. Petersburg; and I will ask your father for money. But you really must try and do it as cheaply as you can; he has become so troublesome lately about the smallest expense. Yes; go to Russia, my dear boy; and everything shall be comfortably settled and forgotten before you return.'

Lord Keswick shook his head. 'I could not do it,' he said; 'I couldn't really. It would be too d——d shabby!'

'There is no necessity for using bad language,' said Lady Grassmere, leaning back in her chair with an air of languid disgust; 'and as for shabbiness, I think if anyone has a right to complain of that, it is we, and not these Howard people. I shall always believe that

the whole scheme was concocted by that wretched old man to entrap you into marrying his daughter. The story is really too absurdly improbable! As if people made wills and then hid them! Nothing shall convince me that that horrid smirking man has not had the paper in his pocket all along.'

'I can answer for it that Linda knew nothing about it, anyhow,' said Lord Keswick, too lazy to argue the question of Mr. Howard's guilt or innocence.

'Pray do not call the girl by her Christian name,' said Lady Grassmere. 'It is not the proper thing to do, now that you are no longer engaged to her. I am not blaming her. She seems to me to have acted very rightly in the matter; and I understood you to say that she had entirely released you from your engagement.'

'Oh, yes; she says the whole thing is off. I don't think she ever was very keen about it, you know. All the same, it don't look well to throw her over the moment one hears that all the money is not there. And to tell the honest

truth, mother, I really am awfully fond of Linda.'

'Fond of her!' ejaculated Lady Grassmere, with an indescribable accent of contempt. 'What do you mean? Surely you can't have been such an idiot as to fall in love with the girl?'

'Not quite that, I think,' answered Lord Keswick, laughing a little shamefacedly; 'but I like her better than I shall ever like anyone else; and that goes for something, you know, when it is a question of a companion for life. And I'll tell you what—I'm sick of this marrying for money. It's too confoundedly base and mean; and—and it's beneath me; and if you prevent my marrying Linda you needn't ask me to make up to any more heiresses, for I tell you plainly I won't do it. I'd rather starve, by Jove!'

'Go away,' said Lady Grassmere, with an exhausted wave of her hand. 'Go to Russia, and talk rubbish to the Russians, if you think they will stand it. In my present weak state I can't. Go away; and thank Heaven that

you have a mother to keep you from making a fool of yourself. Go to Russia.'

And the upshot of it was that Lord Keswick went. He protested—with some energy at first, but more feebly afterwards—and finally gave way, as he had always done, from his childhood, when he had been opposed with any approach to determination. Matrimonial matters were, in truth, as he said to himself, 'not much in his line.' He thought he had understood what was his duty towards Linda; but perhaps, after all, his mother knew best; and she expressed herself confident of being able to conclude the matter to everybody's satisfaction. Very likely it might be the wisest plan to leave her free to act as she wished. Certainly it would be the least troublesome.

Lady Grassmere, being thus left unfettered, sat down and wrote a short but not unfriendly note to Linda, in which she spoke of the engagement as having been dissolved by mutual consent, and expressed her sincere regret that circumstances should have rendered such a step inevitable. 'I blame nobody,' her

ladyship was kind enough to say, 'though it does seem strange that your uncle's executors should have made so *extraordinary* a mistake.' Then she expressed a hope that she might meet Miss Howard at some future time, and assured her that she would always be glad to hear of her welfare. Of Mr. Howard and his proffered three thousand a-year she did not deign to speak at all.

All of which Linda, when she received the letter, perfectly understood, and in nowise resented. She had never harboured any illusions upon the subject of Lady Grassmere's friendliness, and she thought it quite natural that that worldly-wise lady should cast her off now that there was nothing to be gained by patronising her. What Lady Grassmere did not know, and never could have been brought to believe, was that Miss Howard, on her side, would not now have consented to marry Lord Keswick. So long as she had felt that she would be inflicting an injury upon one who had been uniformly kind to her by breaking off the match Linda would not allow herself to think

of doing so, even though she had found out, to her sorrow, that her heart had gone into the keeping of another man ; but now matters were altered—she was once more her own mistress ; and it was Lord Keswick's interest as well as hers that their compact should be annulled. Knowing this, Linda was not disposed to be angry with Lady Grassmere ; but Lord Sturdham was highly incensed, as was also Mr. Howard. These two antagonistic natures became almost friendly by reason of their common indignation.

'That woman is absolutely without shame!' exclaimed Lord Sturdham.

'And deuced impertinent into the bargain,' chimed in Mr. Howard.

'A more cruel and heartless letter I never read,' said the one old gentleman.

'And not so much as a thank you for my offer of three thousand a-year!' cried the other. 'It isn't every man who can or will do that much for his daughter. And so Lady Grassmere will find out.'

'Such actions ought not to be allowed to go

unpunished,' said Lord Sturdham, emphatically. 'In my young days Keswick would have got the horsewhipping he deserves; but we are too civilised now to take notice of an insult.'

'But, James,' put in Lady Sturdham, 'you forget that it was Linda, not Lord Keswick, who broke off the engagement.'

'Pooh, pooh, my dear, we all know what that means. It sounds better, of course, to say that she took the initiative; but who is likely to believe it? I shall take care to let Grassmere know what I think of his son's conduct; and as for that woman, I must request, Selina, that you will not receive her, or call upon her, when we go to London.'

'Very well, James,' answered Lady Sturdham, submissively—speaking, it may be presumed, with a mental reservation.

'Of one thing,' resumed her indignant lord, 'I am quite convinced, at any rate—that Linda is very well out of this match.'

'Perhaps so,' said Mr. Howard, who was a good deal chagrined at the failure of his scheme, 'perhaps so; but I confess that, for

my own part, I do not think that engagements ought to be lightly entered into or lightly broken. When people are betrothed they have already, in some sort, agreed to take one another for better or worse; and I do not think they should allow a matter of a few thousands a-year to part them.'

After recording these very creditable sentiments it is painful to have to add that Mr. Howard's application of them to his own case was not so close as it ought to have been. No sooner, indeed, did this bad old man find himself in secure possession of a handsome income for the remainder of his days than he began to cast about him for a decent pretext for getting rid of poor Mrs. Williams, with whom he no longer felt the slightest inclination to encumber himself. With this end in view he despatched to that too confiding lady a long and beautifully worded letter, informing her of the unexpected change in his circumstances, and speaking in a spirit rather of resignation than of joy of the riches and responsibilities which had been shifted from his daughter's shoulders

to his own. He had not desired this, he said; he had been well contented with the peaceful prospect which, previously to the discovery of the will, had seemed to be mapped out for his declining years,. But the decrees of heaven were inscrutable: no man could ignore them or fashion his life precisely in the manner most agreeable to himself. Even now he had been compelled unwillingly to acknowledge that the plans which he had formed for the future must be greatly modified, in order to fit in with cares and duties which it would be wrong in him to neglect. He had for many years carefully watched the course of English politics, and he had formed opinions with reference to several important subjects—such as, for instance, the enlargement of the franchise, the relations of labour to capital, and the necessity for a scheme of compulsory education—opinions which he now felt that he ought to give utterance to in the Parliament of the nation. Upon many a man silence was imposed by the obscurity of his position; but one who, having the power to proclaim his convictions, hesitated to serve his

country, in this way, to the best of his ability, was worthy of all blame. Nevertheless, a political career demanded self-abnegation, the abandonment of many innocent recreations, the renunciation of domestic ties—and so forth, and so forth, through six closely-written pages.

But Mrs. Williams was obtuse, and would not understand these delicately veiled hints. She wrote to express her hearty approval of Mr. Howard's resolution. His talents, she declared, she had appreciated from the first, and she was proud to think that they would now be made manifest to the world. Nor need he fear that domestic ties would be any drag upon him. She was not a girl, to want her husband to be for ever at her elbow. It would be enough for her to read his speeches in the papers, and to know that he had a comfortable home to come to when his daily labours were at an end.

It thus became necessary that Mr. Howard should undertake a journey to Brighton, in order to make his meaning more clear; and it will be satisfactory to all lovers of justice to

hear that he spent an exceedingly trying day there. At the end of it, however, he left the widow's house free of all entanglements; for a just man and one tenacious of his purpose is to be shaken neither by tears nor by reproaches, nor even by dire threats of legal proceedings. The latter menace, indeed, Mr. Howard could afford to laugh at, knowing full well that it would never be carried into effect.

'Bring your action by all means, my dear madam, if you choose,' said he, blandly. 'It will give me very great pleasure to pay any damages that may be awarded to you. Only I warn you, as a friend, that you will be universally ridiculed, and that you will never be able to show your face in society again.'

Thus two engagements, contracted out of the love of money, were broken off by means of the same agency. In both cases greed came off victorious; but in both there was comfort for the losing side; and perhaps Mrs. Williams, when her wounded pride had had time to recover itself, may, like Lord Sturdham, have

solaced herself with the reflection that, after all, she was 'well out of it.'

It is to be feared that Mrs. Williams got very little pity or sympathy from Linda. All that wrong-headed young woman's judgments being warped by the primary article of her creed—that papa could do no wrong—it was hardly to be expected that she should view his cruel treatment of the widow with an unprejudiced eye. To her it appeared that everybody had got his and her deserts—everybody, except perhaps one. And who knew but that he, too, might now obtain the object of his wishes—that is, if he still cared about what he had pleaded for with so much earnestness, that hot afternoon, at Southampton? In the meantime sufficient for the day was the joy thereof. To wake up in the morning to the consciousness of freedom; to find all the black clouds that had hung over the future rolling away, and glimpses of a sunny landscape beginning to peep out here and there; to see papa growing rosy and like his old self under the influence of the

healthy country life—were not these blessings enough and to spare?

Mr. Howard no longer complained of the dulness of Beechlands. He had made up his mind to go into Parliament; and he talked politics, all day long, with Lord Sturdham, who soon brought him to a sound Conservative way of thinking. He even took trouble to acquire some superficial knowledge of farming, as one who might, some day, find it advisable to become a landowner. He smoked less, only drank a couple of glasses of wine after dinner, and limited himself to one modest brandy-and-soda before going to bed. The man not only had the faculty of adapting himself to circumstances, but actually could not help so doing. As a future legislator of mature years respectability appeared to him to be the one great thing required of him; and he therefore, to the immense advantage of his health, devoted all his energies towards becoming respectable.

In due course of time his praiseworthy endeavours met with their reward. A vacancy

occurring in the representation of Beechampton, Mr. Howard issued his address, and was returned, without a contest, by the docile electors of that sleepy little borough, nobody thinking it worth while to oppose Lord Sturdham's brother-in-law. Whether Mr. Howard's convictions became modified, or whether, upon reflection, he decided that his vote might be more serviceable to his party than his voice, I do not know, but I believe that he has never yet given the world an opportunity of admiring his eloquence. He is, however, a very constant attendant at the House, where he still sits for Beechampton, and where he may be seen most evenings during the session, having his place, at this present time, among the majority, and lustily calling out 'Hear, hear!' at the proper moment. He is a very well-dressed, sprightly old gentleman, much esteemed, both in the House and out of it, and a standing refutation of the calumnies of those envious persons who pretend that wealth exercises a debasing influence upon its owners. Beechampton is proud of its member, who is always affable with his

constituents, and spends his money like a gentleman, and the Conservative party is not likely to lose the seat during his lifetime.

But this is advancing matters. Mr. Howard did not make his bow to the Speaker till nearly a twelvemonth later than the time with which we are now concerned.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN KENSINGTON GARDENS.

One fine frosty December morning Linda found herself once more in the house at Lancaster Gate of which she was no longer the undisputed mistress. She and her father were in London for a few days, preparatory to paying a round of promised visits in the country. For it must not be supposed that Miss Howard had ceased to receive invitations, or had been dropped by all her friends, as soon as the change in her circumstances had become known. Heaven forbid! All ladies are not so grasping as Lady Grassmere, nor are all young men so traitorous as Lord Keswick (whose conduct, by the way, had met with universal reprobation); and the hospitable doors of many an English mansion were ready to fly open and admit the dispos-

sessed heiress, whose expectations, it will be observed, were still excellent.

Mr. Howard, then, with his customary liberality, had brought his daughter to town, to buy furs and dresses and bonnets, and whatever other articles of feminine adornment might be necessary to enable her to hold her own amongst the distinguished ladies whom she was about to meet; and, on the morning after his arrival, took his place at the foot of the breakfast-table, while the obsequious Hudson handed him a pile of letters.

Truckling, time-serving Hudson! Used he not once to carry the letters to the other end of the table, and affect not to hear when Mr. Howard asked whether there was anything for him? Did he not, upon one occasion, actually decline to send for the carriage, on the ground that he had received 'no horders' to that effect from his young mistress? And behold! last night he presented himself deferentially to the new master of the house, with his cellar-book and his keys, respectfully intimating that he hoped to be allowed to keep his situation; and

even ventured to put forward, in support of his request, the fact that it had been his good fortune to discover the missing will. How did he find that will? How came he to forget so far what was due to his station as to demean himself by doing the housemaid's work of dusting out drawers? How came the rascal to be prying among the letters and papers of his superiors? Mr. Howard asked no questions, but good-humouredly told the man he might stay as long as he behaved himself. Mr. Howard was too much of a philosopher to quarrel with a servant for paying his humble tribute to the golden image before which all England bows down. Perhaps even you and I are a shade more civil to our friend Jones, now that he has a house in London, a house in the country, and shooting and a yacht, than we used to be when he wore a threadbare coat and spent half the year economising at Brussels—though our daily bread doesn't depend upon Jones's favour. Hudson's past offences were forgotten and forgiven; and as to that question of reading other people's letters, what can you expect, if you

will leave your correspondence lying about? (anybody may read mine, and welcome!) And, if Hudson had been dismissed, is it likely that his successor would have proved more scrupulous?

Mr. Howard took his pile of letters from his butler's hand, without any intention of subsequently secreting them, and tossed one out of the packet to Linda as her share.

'It is from Ada Plowden, papa,' said Linda, opening her letter, and glancing at the signature. 'They have come back from their wedding tour.'

'Oh! Sensible girl, that. She has known how to feather her nest.'

'But I didn't think Mr. Plowden was very nice, papa,' observed Linda.

'Thirty thousand a-year is very nice. You can't expect a man to have everything,' said Mr. Howard, reasonably; and Linda went back to her letter, which was written in Ada's accustomed frank spirit.

Mrs. Plowden declared that she was perfectly happy in her new state of life. The

honeymoon, thank goodness, was over. It had been a trying time for both of them; but they had emerged from it triumphantly, and had not quarreled once. Mr. Plowden had had one or two fits of the sulks, but, on being left to himself, had come out of them sheepish and contrite. With careful management there was every hope that these periodical attacks would become less and less frequent, and eventually cease altogether. In the meantime remorse for past misdeeds had taken the form of a shower of diamonds—'which is infinitely preferable to a shower of tears,' said the practical bride. What were Linda's plans for the winter, and was there any chance of their meeting? 'I am dying to show you half-a-dozen dresses which Worth has made for me,' said Mrs. Plowden. 'They are not much trimmed—people are not *wearing* dresses much trimmed, in spite of what the fashion-books say; but the cut of them is a thing to dream of! What do you think of the new colour? Some people think it is too *voyant* for a whole costume; but I must say I like something bright,' &c., &c. The

remainder of the letter was entirely taken up with matters of a like absorbing interest. Then came the following postscript: 'By-the-bye, I hear your old friend, George Mainwairing, is making himself awfully unpopular with the whole county. He shuts himself up completely; won't hunt, won't shoot, won't do anything, except play that weary old fiddle from morning to night. *Entre nous*, I don't believe he and I would ever have got on together, even if he had asked me. I was quite convinced that he never intended to do that before I consented to marry Mr. Plowden; so you may say "Sour grapes," if you like; but it is, nevertheless, quite true that I am thankful things have turned out as they have done.'

So Mrs. Plowden, too, considered herself 'well out of it.'

'I think, papa,' said Linda, looking up from her letter, 'I think I will walk over to South Kensington this morning and see Ada.'

And I would not undertake to say that Mrs. Plowden's postscript had nothing to do with Miss Howard's desire to visit her friend.

Linda had received no communication, direct or indirect, from Mainwairing since the day when she had driven away in Lady Sturdham's carriage and left him standing, hat in hand, on the highroad; and it must be confessed that his silence had caused her some surprise. She had heard of him, indeed, through Ada Tower, who had described him, in her letters, as much changed, and by no means improved; and who had, no doubt, also informed him of Linda's loss of fortune, and consequent rupture with Lord Keswick; but, if so, the news had not affected him in such a manner as might have been anticipated. He had neither written to Linda nor sought her out, which surely he would have done, had his love been so unalterable as he had professed it to be. Could he really have forgotten so soon? It was not surprising that this question should have occasioned Linda some perplexity and a good deal of secret unhappiness. She had given her whole heart to this man, deeming that she had a right to do so, having heard from his own lips that he loved her; and as the weeks and months

passed on, and he made no sign, the hopes which had gladdened her when she first became free again faded away, and left her almost as sad as she had been in the days of her wealth. But, if she suffered, she at least took care that no one should know it. Outwardly she was more cheerful and bright than she had been for some time past; she talked a good deal, laughed as much as she could, and never lost an opportunity of amusing herself. And I daresay she often cried herself to sleep. But she never tried to put Mainwairing out of her thoughts. She thought no shame of loving him, since he had once loved her. If he did so no longer that was a misfortune; but it could make no difference in her feelings. Her pride was a little hurt, but her heart was steadfast.

So Linda set out to walk across Kensington Gardens; and as she tripped briskly along under the leafless trees, with the blue sky overhead and the sunlight, yellowed by the London mist, shining palely on the frozen ground, she wondered why it was that Mr. Mainwairing

held aloof from the society of his neighbours. According to Mrs. Plowden's account he was evidently not happy in his mind; but what cause for unhappiness he could have, save one, which, if it existed, he had it in his own power to remove, Linda could not imagine. And while she was still debating this question a quick footfall rang on the ground behind her, came nearer, overtook her, stopped with a sudden jerk—and, lo and behold! there was the man himself.

No two people could have looked less pleased at meeting one another than did Linda and Mainwairing. Both their faces assumed an expression of constraint and annoyance, and both of them glanced instinctively to right and left, as if in search of some way of escape. But as it was equally impracticable for them to take to their heels in different directions and to pass on without a word, Mainwairing bowed, and Linda, laughing rather uneasily, remarked—

'We seem fated to meet unexpectedly, Mr. Mainwairing. I did not know you were in London.'

'I only came up last night,' he said. 'I did not know you were here either, or I should have put off coming.'

This was at all events candid. Linda could only survey Mr. Mainwairing with raised eyebrows of astonishment.

'Is it rude to say so?' he asked. 'If it is I beg your pardon. I fancied you would understand why it must be painful to me to see you. Some day or other I hope we shall be good friends again and meet often; but it would be absurd in me to pretend that I am capable of that kind of thing just yet.'

'Why should we not be good friends?' asked Linda, demurely, drawing patterns on the path with the point of her umbrella. 'What have I done?'

'Done? Oh, nothing. You don't think I am sulky because I can't have what I want, surely? I am not such a fool as that. Only I think it is better that we should not meet just at present. Suppose you had lost a friend or a relation—your father, let us say, for I believe you are fonder of him than of anybody—you

would like to go away for a time, would you not? You couldn't go about your ordinary occupations in the house where he had died just at first. You couldn't see your friends, and play the piano, and order the dinner, as if nothing had happened. But in a year, or in two years, you would be able to go back and sit in his chair, and drink his wine, and give dinner-parties in his dining-room, as other people do whose relations have been dead a reasonable time. I don't say you would love him or regret him less, but you would have got accustomed to doing without him. Of course you would. People can't pass their whole lives in lamenting the dead; and I don't mean to nurse my sorrow for ever. But I must have a little time. I am still sore and down in the mouth and aching all over. Let me sit in my corner and rub myself and moan for a bit, and presently I shall get up, with a shake and a sigh, and nobody will suspect what a beating I have had.'

Linda continued to prod the earth with great diligence, but a smile was hovering about the

corners of her mouth. 'I couldn't help refusing you——' she said at last, very slowly.

'I know that—I know that.'

'Because I was engaged to Lord Keswick at the time, and——'

'And you didn't care a button for Lord Keswick at the time; so that that had not much to do with it, that I can see. Well, well, I am glad you are not going to marry him, at all events. Whoever your husband may be, Miss Howard, I hope you will love him.'

'Perhaps I shall never marry at all,' suggested Linda, gravely.

Mainwairing smiled with melancholy incredulity. 'The time will come, Miss Howard,' said he, 'and the man too. I am not going to be jealous of him—not even in the depths of my heart—only, when he comes, I hope he will be good enough for you.'

This was very magnanimous, but a little bit exasperating. How dense Mr. Mainwairing seemed to have become! 'Must I propose to him myself?' inwardly ejaculated Linda, in

despair. 'I can't marry the man,' she said at length, 'if—if he won't ask me.'

Something in her voice made Mainwairing start as if he had been shot. 'Linda!' he exclaimed, in a tone of such agitation that it sounded almost like anger, 'what do you mean?'

She said nothing, but she looked up, for the first time, and her eyes met those of her questioner.

Two umbrellas fell to the ground with a simultaneous clatter, and lay, prone and unheeded, where they had fallen. For Mainwairing had seized Linda by both her hands, and in such an attitude a knobby umbrella-handle is an impediment best cast away. There they stood, face to face at last, gazing into one another's faces in speechless happiness, and looking, from the further end of the long wintry avenue, like nothing so much as a capital H. Corporal Larkins of the Scots Fusilier Guards, who happened to be taking a walk at the time with an attendant nursemaid, descried the

couple from afar and pointed them out to his companion, with a chuckle,

'Well, I'm sure!' observed that young person, very properly shocked. 'She ain't shy —*she* ain't!'

'Won't she just get snuff when her ma comes round the corner and ketches her!' says the jocular corporal, as the intervening trees shut out this interesting tableau.

Let us, too, saunter on behind the hulking soldier and study the fit of his scarlet tunic, or the amazing amount of grease on his hair, or Susan's sealskin jacket (how is it that all the cooks and all the nurses have got sealskin jackets?), or anything else you please, for the next few minutes. By the time that we have taken a turn or two Mainwairing's conversation and Linda's may have assumed a form more likely to interest the general reader.

They are walking along quite soberly, side by side, now, having picked up their respective umbrellas and awakened to the consciousness that Kensington Gardens are open to the public,

which is in the habit of making use of its privilege.

'But what made you say you hated me?' he asked.

'I never said anything of the kind.'

'Yes, you did; I solemnly declare you did —or something to that effect, at any rate.'

'I don't know what I said,' confessed Linda. 'I had to get rid of you, you see, and that was all I thought about.'

'And so you told those abominable—you equivocated in that shameful manner, just to serve your own purposes? Oh, Linda, to think that you could fib in that calm way!'

'I wasn't calm,' exclaimed Linda, indignantly. 'How can you say I was calm, when you know you yourself thought I was going to faint? I believe I should have fainted if the road had not been so dusty, and if I hadn't been afraid of somebody coming.'

'You really did care a little about me, then?'

'Don't you think you might have guessed that?'

'No; not when you went on asseverating that you couldn't bear the sight of me. It was all very well to dissemble your love, but why did you give me that emphatic moral kicking down-stairs? I never was so humiliated in all my life.'

'And were you very unhappy?'

'Well, yes. I don't mind admitting to you, in strict confidence, that the last four months have been about the most miserable I have ever spent.'

'And do you forgive me now?'

'Forgive you!——'

Here it seems advisable to make another pause. Nobody wants to look on at a love scene: such intrusions are hardly fair to the actors, and are productive of very little amusement to bystanders. And perhaps, all things considered, the pause may as well be converted into a full stop. The moment is a propitious one. Nearly all the persons with whom we have been concerned are in an enviable state of bliss and prosperity. Nearly all of them are looking forward to a future full of bright

promises. Above all, nearly all of them have got their pockets full of money. Is it not best to take leave of them at once, lest they invest their treasure in foreign securities, or fall ill, or otherwise encounter troublous times, and so we part from them in sorrow?

Troubles enough, no doubt, are in store for them all, as for all human creatures. Let us hasten to drop the curtain while as yet the sun shines in an unclouded sky, and the bride smiles under her orange-blossoms, and the little boys at the church-door *hooray*, and the organ thunders out the Wedding March.

THE END.

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